

Book 3 - The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts

Chapter 1 - Stone Sculpting (part 1)

The warm, comfortable rays of the spring sun shone down upon the bros of dorm 1987, who were resting in their backyard.

Yale, George, and Reynolds were all engaged in idle conversation. By now, Yale and George were both 16 years old, while Reynolds was now 14. The three of them had quickly gained in height, and even the shortest Reynolds was now 1.6 meters tall. The tallest of them was Yale, at an astonishing 1.9 meters.

“George, stop faking in front of the two of us. Even fourth bro has lost his virginity. Why are you and third bro still faking? How about this, at the end of this month, why don’t you and third bro both go to Fenlai City’s “Jade Water Paradise”. I’ll handle the expenses. I guarantee that both of you will be extremely comfortable, and I’ll also guarantee that the girl will also be a virgin. Deal?” Holding two small stone weights, Yale was doing a chest workout while laughing as he spoke.

Those two stone weights each most likely weighed around 20-30 pounds. Linley generally disdained such light weights.

George laughed as well. “Boss Yale, stop trying to force us. Why don’t you guys go to the Jade Water Heaven while third bro and I go drinking. Isn’t that a better idea?”

Reynolds mocked from the side, “George, you, simply aren’t a man at all.”

George could only laugh helplessly.

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard from outside the courtyard. Yale put down the two stone weights and headed towards the courtyard exit while saying, “I bet it is third bro. C’mom, time to eat...” Before he finished his words, Yale suddenly went silent.

He saw Linley stride forward, carrying a huge rock on his shoulders, at least three feet high and a hundred pounds heavy.

But Linley clearly was carrying this boulder into the dorm with ease. Yale, George, and Reynolds all stared, slack-jawed. Linley casually set down the giant rock in a corner of the courtyard, and the weighty sound of the rock slamming into the ground made all their hearts tremble.

"What the hell? Third bro, I know you are strong, but how are you this strong?" Yale stared at the boulder. "Is the boulder hollow or something?" As he spoke, Yale moved forward and stretched out his hands, giving the boulder a test.

"Hrrrrrngh!"

Yale used all of his strength, and his entire face flushed dark red, but that giant boulder seemed to be rooted into the earth as it didn't budge at all.

"Boss Yale, stop wasting your energy. There's no way you can move it." Linley laughed.

Yale's physical strength was weaker than that of even a warrior of the first rank. How could he lift it?

Reynolds stared at the boulder with round eyes. Letting out a few surprised breaths, he suddenly turned his head and stared at Linley questioningly. "Hey, Linley, why did you bring such a huge boulder into our dorm? Oh, I know!" Reynolds eyes lit up. "I've seen powerful warriors use their hands to lift up giant boulders as a form of weight training. Are you preparing to start weight lifting, Linley?"

"Such a huge boulder could smash me into meat paste." George stared at the boulder, also letting out a few surprised breaths before turning to look questioningly at Linley. "Third bro, why did you bring this giant boulder into our apartment?"

Linley smiled at his three bros, and he said two words: "Stone sculpting!"

Based on what Doehring Cowart had said, his sculptures were now qualified to be placed within the standard hall. But it took a lot of time to carve each piece, and usually a day wasn't enough. In the past, he could casually carve at the rear mountains without worrying about making mistakes, but now things were different.

"Stone sculpting?"

Reynolds, George, and Yale all stared at Linley, shock in their eyes.

"What, is this really shocking?" Linley looked back at his three bros.

Reynolds hurriedly said, "It isn't shocking, no. It is extremely shocking! We four bros have lived together for six or seven years now, but I've never seen you sculpt stone before. Are you planning to start training today?"

Linley laughed, "Who says I've never been trained before? I've been practicing stone sculpting in the rear mountains for over five years now, but this time, after I finish

this piece, I plan to take it to the Proulx Gallery and display it there and see if it can be sold for any money."

In order to come up with a sufficient amount of money to allow his little brother, Wharton, have sufficient funds to go with Housekeeper Hiri to the O'Brien Empire to request admittance and training, the Baruch clan had virtually exhausted all of its funds.

But despite this, Hogg was still very happy.

So what if his family had bankrupted itself? His elder son, Linley, was a student at the Ernst Institute, and upon graduation would definitely become a powerful magus. And his younger son, Wharton, had the possibility of becoming a Dragonblood Warrior.

Hogg could already foresee the dawning splendor of the Baruch clan!

"The Proulx Gallery?" Upon hearing this, Yale and the other two looked at Linley in shock.

Linley was the pride of their dorm, dorm 1987. Despite being just fifteen years old, he had entered the fifth grade at the Ernst Institute, and had been acclaimed alongside Dixie as one of the 'Two Ultimate Geniuses of the Ernst Institute'. Yale and the others all acknowledged Linley as being a genius, but...

Stonesculpting was an extremely profound art form.

Many people would painstakingly train for decades, but still only be considered ordinary sculptors. As an extremely ancient and long-lived art form, how could it be easy for stonesculpting to be mastered? How did Linley dare to dream that his artworks would be exhibited in the most venerated of art galleries, the Proulx Gallery?

"Third bro, don't get too carried away." George joked in a consoling manner.

"Linley, I'm worried...your sculpture, will anyone actually buy it?" Reynolds frowned, a look of disbelief on his face.

Yale laughed loudly. "Why are you guys acting like this? Third bro, go ahead and put on an exhibit. As long as you have an exhibit, I'll spend ten thousand gold to buy it and help spread your fame."

"I'm telling the truth." Linley retrieved a straight chisel from his clothes.

"Straight chisel?" Reynolds said in surprise. "Linley, looks like you've made some preparations. But in the past, I was also prepared to learn stonesculpting, so I know that lots of tools are needed, including the straight chisel, the butterfly chisel, the triangular chisel, the jade bowl knife, and tools like saws. What, did you only prepare a single tool?"

George, Reynolds, and Yale all knew at least some rudiments about art.

Linley didn't say too much.

Wielding his straight chisel, Linley naturally entered a tranquil mental state. His spirit could feel the earth essence flowing through the boulder in front of him, and could even sense, just barely, the veins in it. Smiling, Linley began to use the chisel.

The flashing chisel reflected the light of the sun, causing the nearby Reynolds and the others to squint. But all of them continued to stare at the boulder.

"Whooooosh!"

Wherever the shadow of the chisel fell, large pieces of stone began to fall as well.

"How is this possible?" Yale watched in astonishment. "To remove such a large piece of rock, a saw should be used to chop it. He actually removed it with just a straight chisel. How astonishing must his wrist strength be?" Next to him, Reynolds and George both fell totally silent.

Wrist strength?

To do this in such a manner as casually as Linley did, with every cut being perfectly even, was not something which could be accomplished just with strong wrists.

Linley was as tranquil as a pond of still water. The straight chisel in his left hand stretched out, quickly carving through all parts of the boulder, and pieces of excess stone continuously rained down. The natural, elegant manner in which Linley carved was a treat to watch.

"Third bro, he...."

Yale, George, and Reynolds exchanged glances. At this moment, they all felt in their hearts that perhaps Linley truly was an expert stone sculptor.

Tranquil. Natural. Peaceful.

Linley very much enjoyed the feeling of stone sculpting. At his current level, Linley didn't have to consider how much effort or strength should be used in any particular

place. The straight chisel in his hands would naturally attain the most perfect usage of force. This was a subconscious effect.

Compared to the 'Straight Chisel School'?

None of the other schools of stone sculpting could be so effortless. All the experts of the other schools had to consider which of the many various types of tools should be used for each part of the sculpture. This alone was exhausting.

In this natural, unrestrained manner, Linley's stonesculpting led his spiritual essence to rapidly grow, like the grass after a rain. That sensation of natural growth was extremely wondrous to Linley, making him feel comfortable from his very core.

Linley's right hand suddenly halted.

The flying dust and specks of stone took a bit longer to settle, but the outline of a crawling creature could be seen from the boulder.

"Why are you guys standing there in a daze? All shocked?" Linley laughed as he turned to look at Yale and the others. "I've just made a simple outline. There's a lot more time and effort I'll have to spend later. Come on, let's get lunch."

Yale, George, and Reynolds all glanced at each other.

Just based on what Linley had just shown them, all three of them were sure of one thing:

"Genius." Yale said admiringly.

"A genius amongst experts." George added.

Even amongst stone sculptors, for someone to be able to reach Linley's level of proficiency in just five or six years was an event which occurred perhaps once in a century.

Chapter 2 - Stone Sculpting (part 2)

Within the Huadeli Hotel.

Per Yale, "Since we just found out today that Third Bro is an expert stonemason, we absolutely must go out and celebrate. Let's go to the Huadeli Hotel." And just like

that, the four of them had gone to the Huadeli Hotel. As soon as they stepped foot within, many students patronizing the hotel turned to stare at them.

The vast majority of the students' gazes were focused on Linley.

Dixie, Linley!

The most prominent, standout geniuses of the Ernst Institute. Any place they went became a focal point of attention. From far away, many students began to chat amongst themselves in lowered voices.

The four bros were seated, now, and the dishes had just arrived.

"Squeak squeak." Bebe, who had been napping lazily this entire time, stuck his little head from out of Linley's robes. His pair of slick, devilish little eyes stared at a gleaming roasted chicken on the table. Reynolds immediately grabbed the chicken and offered it to Bebe. "Bebe, c'mere."

"Boss Linley, I'm gonna go eat." Bebe immediately said mentally to Linley.

Before Linley even had the chance to reply, Bebe leaped onto the table, grabbed the chicken, and began to chomp down on it. In less than ten seconds, the entire roasted chicken had been totally devoured by a little Shadowmouse that was a full size smaller than it.

"Third bro, each time when I see how fast Bebe eats, my heart can't help but shudder." Yale laughed.

After eating, Bebe turned around to look at Linley. Seeing grease cover Bebe's paws, Linley couldn't help but frown.

"Squeak squeak."

Bebe intentionally chirped out twice towards Linley, and then half-closed his eyes in a very self-delighted manner, while at the same time, his entire body radiated a black glow. The black aura expanded, and then, in the blink of an eye, disappeared. But Bebe's two previously oily paws as well as tail was now absolutely clean.

Rubbing his small face, Bebe stared at Linley and chirped once, while saying mentally, "Boss Linley, clean enough for ya?"

Linley couldn't help but laugh.

"Whoosh." With a flicker, Bebe once more burrowed his way into Linley's clothes.

And then, the four bros began to chat and eat.

"Right, third bro, if you intend to deliver your sculptures to the Proulx Gallery, there's a few things you need to keep in mind." Yale reminded Linley.

"Oh, what do I need to remember?" Linley asked.

Linley didn't know a single thing about the system through which the Proulx Gallery accepted new sculptures.

Yale smiled. "For most sculptures, on the lower left corner, the artist must leave an inscription of his name or pseudonym, signifying that this is your art. That's the first thing. The second thing is that when the sculpture is delivered to the Proulx Gallery, it must be totally sealed and boxed. This is to prevent the sculpture from being damaged while being delivered to the gallery. When the sealed sculpture is delivered to the Proulx Gallery's warehouse, there will be people who will inspect it to see if it is in good condition, as well as take down a detailed recording of your own information. Usually, within three days or so, your artwork will be ready to be displayed at the standard display hall within the Proulx Gallery."

Linley nodded.

Leaving behind one's name on one's artwork was done in order to prevent others from falsely claiming the work was their's.

Linley could also understand the reasoning for requiring the sculpture be boxed and sealed. "Some sculptures are carved very exquisitely and delicately. In the shipping process, it is entirely possible that the sculpture might be damaged. If I totally seal it off, and also add lots of paper and cloth padding, it should be much safer."

"What about pricing and bidding? How does the Proulx Gallery handle this?" Linley asked.

The whole point of delivering the sculpture to the Proulx Gallery was for the sake of making money, so as to improve his family's economic situation.

Yale said delightedly, "The sculptures are placed within the standard hall, and potential buyers are allowed to set any price they want. After a month, the highest bidder will receive the sculpture, while you will get your compensation. Naturally, the Proulx Gallery will receive a 1% transactional commission, with a hard limit of ten gold coins. If your sculpture exceeds a thousand gold coins in price, the commission of the gallery will still remain just ten gold coins."

Linley understood now.

"Third bro, don't worry. I'll arrange for some people in Fenlai City to take care of everything. I guarantee it'll all be to your satisfaction." Yale smiled towards Linley as he spoke. "If the third bro of our dorm delivers a sculpture to the Proulx Gallery and it sells well, I'll gain a lot of face as well."

Off on the side, George couldn't help but sigh with praise. "Third bro, by now, you are a fifth grade student. In the future, you'll no doubt also be a master sculptor. Your future is boundless. You'll no doubt do much better than us."

"A master sculptor? Don't flatter me." Linley laughed at himself.

The four bros chatted as they continued to drink and eat.

"Living in the Ernst Institute really is comfortable," Yale suddenly sighed, putting down his wine cup. "I remember when I was young and I lived at home, our family rules were extremely severe."

Reynolds quirked his lips as well. "We are all students of the Ernst Institute. According to Grandpa Lomu, right now, the world is very chaotic. In the outside world, there is constant warfare and slaughter. The Ernst Institute is backed by the Radiant Church, so no one dares offend it. That's the reason why our lives are so comfortable. In the future, when we go out and train in the real world, we'll see how cruel the world can be."

"Absolutely correct."

Linley nodded and sighed. "I'm a fifth grade student now. Many of my fellow classmates have already gone training in the real world. From what they say, some students die in battle outside, and many are crippled or wounded. Without experiencing real life-and-death battles, it will be hard for us to grow."

"We are just like the pets of the noble families. Our lives might be easy, but how can they compare to the viciousness of the real world?" George also sighed. "I really look forward to the bloody life and death battles which the high level students will engage in. Those exciting, blood-boiling lifestyles must be extremely stimulating."

George, Yale, Reynolds, and Linley were now all fifteen years old. In all of their hearts, there was a thirst for the exciting events of the outside world.

But Yale and the others were far too weak. If they embarked now on that lifestyle of life-and-death battles, their chance of death was far too high.

"Linley, you are a fifth grade student now, yes?" Reynolds suddenly said.

Yale and George also looked at Linley, their eyes gleaming.

Linley took a deep breath, and nodded. "Right. I am now a magus of the fifth rank. I can be considered a high level magus now. In June, I plan to embark on a two month trip to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, returning only in August." Linley had decided long ago.

"The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

Yale, George, and Reynolds all sucked in a cold breath.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the largest mountain range in the Yulan continent, lay less than hundred kilometers east of the Ernst Institute. Many high level students did indeed venture there for their second or third training missions. But most students, for their first training expedition, would select some more ordinary locales.

For example, they might take on some low-risk assignments like being a bodyguard or escorting a caravan.

"Linley, you plan to go to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for your very first training expedition?" Reynolds couldn't help but ask. George and Yale were also worried.

"Relax. I have full confidence."

Linley was rather confident in himself. As a magus of the fifth rank and a warrior of the fourth rank, he possessed great speed as a warrior which could be further supported by the wind-style spell, 'Supersonic'. Based on his current speed, when combining his speed with this spell, Linley could reach the speed of a warrior of the sixth rank.

And even more importantly...

Linley could utilize the high-level wind spell, "Floating Technique."

Chapter 3 - A Night at the Jade Water Paradise

Time flowed on, and in the blink of an eye, it was now the end of May.

During the past two months, every day, Linley spent part of his free time in the meditative state, and the rest either practicing stonecarving or reading. The Ernst

Institute's library held an enormous amount of books within it, and through reading these books, Linley was able to increase the breadth of his knowledge.

May 29th. Morning.

Linley, Yale, George, and Reynolds stood in the square in front of the Proulx Gallery. A nearby carriage contained within it three wooden crates. During these past two months, Linley had actually managed to produce nine new sculptures, but since this was his first time delivering art to the gallery, Linley just wanted to get a taste of how it all worked and thus only brought three.

"Carry those three boxes," Yale directed.

Some servants from Yale's clan began to lift and move the crates.

"Third bro, come with me." Yale clearly was quite familiar with this road, and he headed directly towards the side of the Proulx Gallery. The Proulx Gallery took up a very large amount of space, and off to the side of the main entrance, a few hundred meters away, there was an unremarkable door, with a middle-aged man dressed in warrior attire standing in front of it.

When the middle-aged man saw Yale stride towards him, his eyes lit up and he immediately hurried over. Smiling, he paid his respects and said, "Young master Yale, welcome!"

Yale smiled and nodded. "I imagine you already know why I am here. This is my good friend, Linley. These three sculptures are his. Where are your servants? Have them carry the sculptures inside."

"Please wait." The middle aged man smiled and nodded.

Very soon, several movers emerged from the corridor, and the middle aged man smiled towards Linley. "Young master Linley, per the rules of our Proulx Gallery, you need to leave behind your proof of identification. All you need to do is let us take down the details of your Ernst Institute student identification."

The student identification of the Ernst Institute was more than enough proof.

Linley withdrew his student identification.

Accepting the identification papers from Linley, the middle aged man glanced through them, and his eyes immediately lit up. Shocked, he raised his gaze back to Linley. "Fifth grade?" Linley's grade was very visible on the identification papers.

For someone so young to reach the rank of a magus of the fifth rank was quite surprising indeed.

Yale couldn't help but say proudly, "This brother of mine is one of the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute. Last year, when he was only fourteen years old, at the end-of-year exams, he reached the title of magus of the fifth rank."

One of the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute?

In his heart, the middle-aged man knew quite clearly that the future prospects for this young man standing in front of him, Linley, were boundless. His attitude immediately became much more obsequious. After recording down Linley's biographical details, he made a mark on each of the three crates.

"Young master Linley, everything is handled. All you have to do, young master, is to come back in a month and collect your renumeration." The middle aged man smiled.

"In a month? I don't have any time next month. Can we delay it to three months hence?" Linley asked. Linley was planning to head to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts in a week or two, and on this trip, he was planning on spending two months or so there.

"No rush. As long as your sculptures find buyers, you can come back at any time to collect your fee." The middle aged man nodded.

Yale frowned. "Hrm? What's going on. I remember that in the past, before accepting sculptures, you would first inspect the contents of the crate. Why aren't you doing an inspection this time?"

The middle aged man said, "The reason we inspect the insides of the crates is to prevent unscrupulous people from sending us some already-damaged sculptures. If we are unable to detect the damage, they might claim that the damage was caused by the gallery and try to extort us. But since these three particular sculptures have been delivered by young master Linley and you, young master Yale, I have no concerns. I am confident that someone like you, young master Yale, would not stoop to such actions."

The middle aged man knew exactly what he was doing.

What sort of person was Yale?

Extort the Proulx Gallery? The amount of money that he might be able to extort probably wouldn't even be enough to count as pocket change for him. And the

creator of these sculptures, Linley, was known as one of the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute. How could people like them lower themselves to such base actions?

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Day turned to night. On East Fenlai City's main road, the Fragrant Pavilion Avenue. The third floor of the Jade Water Paradise. Linley and the other three had a room of their own.

The nights at Fenlai City were always quite busy.

But the nights within the Jade Water Paradise were even more bustling, having reached a peak of busy-ness. The coquettish laughs of women could be heard nonstop, while the roaring, heroic laughter of men also constantly sounded out. Within the private room, the four bros drank while making idle conversation, and by each of their sides was a delicate and pretty girl.

“Second bro, third bro, I’m going to go to bed, and fourth bro is as well. The two of you...” His arm draped around a girl with long, green hair, Yale’s breath smelled strongly of liquor.

“That’s enough, boss Yale. Stop talking, alright?” Linley interrupted Yale’s words.

Yale and Reynolds exchanged glances, then looked at Linley and George with contemptuous gazes. And then Yale and Reynolds, each of them with an arm around the waist of their respective companions, left the private room. For two years now, Linley and the gang had often come here.

Generally, Yale and Reynolds would go off to have fun, while Linley and George would at most drink a little and chat with the girls.

“Young master Linley, we’ve known each other for two years now, but you....” The green-haired girl seated next to Linley said in an unhappy voice.

Linley couldn’t help but feel a headache coming.

“Ira [Ai’la], if you are tired, you can go back and get some rest. I guarantee that when the time comes, you won’t receive a single copper coin less than you deserve.” Linley had no choice but to say coldly, causing the girl named Ira to no longer dare speak. It really was quite rare to see someone come to the Jade Water Paradise but only drink.

A white light shone forth from the Coiling Dragon Ring, and transformed itself into Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart, face wreathed in smiles, looked at Linley. Jestingly, he said, 'Hey, Linley. Why do you have such a foul look on your face with such a girl in front of you? Alas, I, a venerable Saint-level Grand Magus, am now just a bodiless spirit. I can't touch a woman, even if I want to. And you, you punk, act in such a way?"

"Grandpa Doehring." Linley frowned unhappily as he said mentally to Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart pursed his lips. "You've never gotten a taste of a woman. If you had, you wouldn't be acting in such a way."

Linley raised his head and stared outside the window, no longer paying any attention to that lecherous old Doehring Cowart. The cold outside air blew on his face, helping Linley to calm down.

"The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. What is it like, inside it?"

In one or two weeks, Linley was going to head off on his journey. Within the Ernst Institute, Linley had heard many legends regarding the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and had also heard much from Doehring Cowart. However, Linley had never gone himself. Thus, Linley had only his own imagination to rely on when trying to picture the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

"In a week, let's go."

Staring outside the window, seeing the boundless night sky, Linley made up his mind.

Chapter 4 - The Price (part 1)

Within the Proulx Gallery. Elegant music wafted over everyone present, as all of the visitors silently inspected one sculpture after another.

The gallery was divided into the main gallery, the expert's gallery, and the master's gallery.

The main gallery took up an enormous amount of space, and also contained the most works of art. Towards the northeast corner of the gallery, there were three

works of art, all of which emanated a very unique aura. Anyone who had spent time studying the art of sculpting would immediately sense the aura.

But there were more than ten thousand works of art in the gallery, and these three sculptures were thus like needles hidden within an ocean. It was quite difficult for anyone to pay them any mind.

“Most of these sculptures feel hollow. They have a shape but no soul.”

The 180-year old Count Juneau [Zhunuo] was slowly making his way through the main hall, his gaze flickering past one work of art after another. Count Juneau didn’t have any other hobbies; the only thing he liked was sculptures. Every day, he would spent his morning strolling through the Proulx Gallery.

But within the main gallery, there were very few sculptures capable of attracting Count Juneau’s interest.

“Milord Count, have any sculptures struck your fancy?” A beautiful attendant by his side said to him. Because Count Juneau came here every morning, all of the attendants working at the Proulx Gallery had become quite familiar with him.

Count Juneau shook his head and laughed. “Haven’t found any yet.”

“Milord Count, the quality of the sculptures here is much inferior than that of the sculptures in the hall of experts and the hall of the masters. Why do you spend every morning here?” The female attendant said curiously.

Count Juneau intentionally let out a mysterious laugh. “You don’t understand. There are countless sculptures within this main hall. Perhaps hidden within there are some good works. The feeling of panning for gold by sifting through mud is quite marvelous.”

“Oh?” The attendant looked at Count Juneau questioningly.

Count Juneau didn’t explain any further. He continued to appraise one sculpture after another without stopping, but when he reached those three works of art sculpted by Linley, his eyes lit up. Having appraised sculptures for over a century, he could immediately discern that these three sculptures were special.

“Cool, natural, proud and aloof...”

Count Juneau couldn’t help but praise.

The word was 'essence'. For a work of art to be termed a 'good' work of art, it had to have that certain special essence to it. At a single glance, Count Juneau could tell that these three works of art emanated a cool, proud, and aloof aura. It was this unique aura which had stopped Count Juneau in his tracks.

"Come over here and help me place a bid. For these three sculptures, I am willing to bid a hundred gold coins each." Count Juneau said to the female attendant.

The female attendant beamed and immediately pulled out a records book. After recording down the registration number of each sculpture, she took out three pieces of paper and placed them next to the sculptures, with each piece of paper bearing the words 'hundred gold coins' on them.

While the female attendant was doing her administrative work, Count Juneau continued to savor these three sculptures.

"Wait a second!" Juneau's shadowy eyes suddenly lit up again as he stared fixedly at the sculpture of the 'Velocidragon'. "How is it possible that the scaly armor on the back of the Velocidragon shares the same outline and line with the leg, as though it were all done as part of one series? Logically speaking, the scaly carapace should have been carved by a butterfly chisel, while the leg should have been carved using the straight chisel. No matter how careful one is, a sculptor can't possibly make the lines flow together 100% perfectly!"

Count Juneau had studied sculpture for over a century.

Originally, he wasn't a particularly wealthy noble, but based on his keen sight, he had collected many sculptures at a low price which he would later sell at a much higher price. This was how Count Juneau had become one of the wealthy nobles of Fenlai City.

"Can it be that it was carved using a single tool? Impossible, aside from the butterfly chisel, what tool could possibly have been used to carve out such perfect, exquisite details in each protruding scale?" Count Juneau frowned, concentrating fiercely. He had never seen something so queer.

"Milord Count?" Seeing him in a daze, the female attendant couldn't help but call out to him softly.

Count Juneau's eyes flickered. He said to himself, "I didn't expect that I would encounter such a unique work of art in the main hall of the Proulx Gallery. I can't let others notice it. If I bid a hundred gold coins, some people will take special notice of it. It might cause the price to dramatically increase."

Count Juneau immediately made his decision.

He would leave these sculptures alone for a few days, and come back later to bid on it during the final two days.

"Help assist me in cancelling my offer." Count Juneau directly said to the woman next to him.

"Cancel?" The female attendant was startled. Based on their normal rules, once a bid was made, it could not be retracted. But Count Juneau was a very old, longstanding customer of the Proulx Gallery, and so the female attendant very matter-of-factly removed the three bidding stickers.

"Might I ask milord Count why you have retracted your bid?" The female attendant asked.

Count Juneau smiled mysteriously. "No need for you to ask. Oh, right, I want to ask you, how many days have these three sculptures been on display?"

The female attendant flipped through her records, then smiled. "These three sculptures will be on display until June 30th. They were just brought here to the main hall yesterday."

Count Juneau nodded fractionally.

"Alright, I'll wander around a bit. You can go ahead and do what you need to do." Count Juneau smiled.

But in his heart, Count Juneau secretly rejoiced. In his appraisal, the true valuation of these three sculptures should be in the range of three thousand gold pieces. An ordinary sculpture by an expert was worth around a thousand gold pieces, and these three sculptures were all carved in a very unique manner. Just based on that alone, the actual valuation would be doubled.

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Count Juneau continued to visit the gallery every day. Indeed, just as he had expected, because the Proulx Gallery had so many sculptures, nobody else had managed to discover these three sculptures. Even if someone had, they only felt that the sculptures looked nice, and couldn't see the true value of these sculptures.

June 10th.

Count Juneau once more arrived at the Proulx Gallery. Casually strolling about the main hall, he browsed through the selections. But once he reached the three sculptures, his face tightened. Next to each of the sculptures, there was a bidding slip.

Three stone sculptures, each one with a bid for three hundred gold coins.

Seeing this bid, Count Juneau inwardly seethed. "Fool! Even if you saw the true value of the sculptures, why would you bid such a high price right off the bat? This will just draw more attention to it." Count Juneau's heart was filled with rage, but there was nothing he could do. He didn't have the authority to retract someone else's bid.

Everything unfolded just as he predicted and feared.

June 12th. Count Juneau once again reached the three sculptures. By now, the price had changed once again.

"Five hundred gold coins?" Count Juneau's eyes narrowed to slits. "Seems like there's quite a few people who know quality when they see it."

Chapter 5- The Price (part 2)

Count Juneau still refused to make a bid. He planned to make his bid on June 30th. As time flowed past, the valuation of the three sculptures continued to rise, but because even an expert crafter's work was valued at around a thousand gold, the price rose rather slowly.

500 gold coins. 510 gold coins. 515 gold coins.

The bids continued to rise slowly. By June 29th, they had only risen to 625 gold coins.

June 30th.

Count Juneau actually did not appear this morning, which was quite a rare occasion. He waited until nightfall, because the Proulx Gallery did not close until midnight. Linley's three sculptures would also be removed from the gallery at midnight.

"The price yesterday was 625 gold coins. I'll make my bid at the end." Count Juneau smiled as he walked towards the three sculptures.

“900 gold coins? What idiot made this bid?” Upon seeing the highest bid, Count Juneau’s heart exploded with fury.

The price yesterday was just 625 gold coins, but in a day, the price had risen so dramatically. Although Count Juneau was furious, there was nothing he could do. He decided to wait patiently, and after a long period of time, he finally looked up to see the clock up above.

“It’s already 11 PM. In an hour, the place will close.” Count Juneau revealed a hint of a smile.

In Fenlai City, Count Juneau could be considered a middle-class noble. When he was young, Count Juneau was actually quite poor. Later, it was due to his shrewd investment in and collecting of sculptures that helped him slowly gain wealth. His current net worth was in the hundreds of thousands of gold coins. He could be considered a rather well off noble.

“Count Juneau, you are here as well?” A whiskered middle-aged man in a swallow shirt smiled as he walked over.

Upon seeing this person, Count Juneau’s countenance changed, but he still was able to smile calmly. “Count Demme [De’mu]! It’s almost eleven. Why are you here?” But in his heart, Count Juneau felt that things had just taken a turn for the worse.

Count Juneau and Count Demme were both considered rather famous collectors of sculpture within the noble circles of Fenlai City.

“Me? For these three sculptures, of course.” Count Demme stroked his whiskers, then said contentedly, “Count Juneau, take a look. The lines and aura of these three sculptures are so very mesmerizing. The expert who was able to produce such a unique aura must surely also be a unique person.”

Count Juneau’s heart trembled.

Indeed...

This Count Demme had also seen the value of these three sculptures. For him to arrive at eleven o’clock most likely meant he had the same idea as Count Juneau.

“Miss, come over here, please.” Count Demme said quite courteously to a nearby female attendant, who walked towards them with a smile. Count Demme pointed at Linley’s three sculptures. “I’m willing to pay a thousand gold coins for each one of these sculptures.”

The attendant said courteously, "Just a moment."

She took out a record book and made some notations before placing the bidding slips next to the sculptures.

"A thousand gold coins?" The facial muscles on Count Juneau's face twitched.

Count Demme said to him with a smile, "Count Juneau, these three sculptures really are exceptional. Right, what brings you out here so late at night, rather than resting at home? Are you here for these three sculptures as well?"

Count Juneau let out a light hum.

"I didn't expect that Count Demme would be so interested in these three sculptures. Honestly, I hadn't paid them much attention yet. Let me take a good look first." Count Juneau smiled, then turned and began intensely studying the three sculptures, totally ignoring Count Demme.

Seeing the scene before him, Count Demme sneered mentally. "Old fellow, do you really think you can hide your thoughts from me?"

Like the murmurs of a river, the music continued to play in the main hall of the Proulx Gallery Count Juneau and Count Demme both quietly viewed various sculptures. The gallery remained as quiet as ever.

"Dong. Dong." The clocks on the walls began to chime.

It was now midnight.

"Miss, please come here." Count Juneau said to the attendant, who immediately ran over.

"These three sculptures, I am willing to buy for 1010 gold pieces." Count Juneau made his bid at the last moment.

The attendant saw that the current bid on the sculptures was 1000 gold pieces. She couldn't help but glance sideways at Count Juneau. It was quite fortunate that Count Juneau had added ten pieces, and not just one.

"Please wait a moment." The attendant took out her record book.

"Count Juneau, you actually just overbid by ten gold pieces? I'll offer 1100 gold pieces!" Count Demme's voice rang out. Count Juneau frowned as he turned to stare at Count Demme, who was casually striding over with a jocular air, an arrogant look in his eyes.

As it turned out, Count Demme had been paying attention to Count Juneau this entire time, and as soon as Count Juneau made his bid, he came over.

"I bid 1200." Count Juneau said in a low voice, his fury clearly visible. Seeing the oncoming struggle between the two nobles, the attendant closed her record book and stood off to the side, happily watching the battle. The attendants of the Proulx Gallery loved to see customers enter bidding wars.

Count Demme glanced at Count Juneau with 'astonishment'. "Count Juneau, even the sculptures in the hall of the experts is worth only around a thousand gold coins. How could a frugal man such as you be willing to pay 1200 gold?"

Frugal?

Miserly was the word! Count Juneau was notorious for his miserliness.

"Count Juneau, if even you are willing to bid 1200, then I can't be stingy either. 1300 gold pieces!"

Count Juneau's gaze was ice cold. "The only reason why I am willing to offer a high price for these three sculptures is because I am fond of them. Their real value is only around a thousand gold or so. 1500 gold pieces! If you, Count Demme, are willing to make a higher bid, then you can take them." Count Juneau made his final offer.

In all honesty, Count Demme was not as insightful as Count Juneau. He didn't discover the unique, strange aura to these statues.

In Count Demme's eyes, these statues didn't hold any secrets. They were just three good pieces of art, worth a thousand gold or so. If he raised the price any further, there wouldn't be much point.

"Haha." Count Demme laughed. "It's so rare for Count Juneau to be so refreshingly magnanimous in his bidding. In honor of this occasion, I certainly can't rob a man of his beloved possessions. These three sculptures are all yours, Count Juneau."

Only now did the attendant step forward again and begin recording the bid into her book.

"Milord Counts, it is already midnight. The gallery is about to close. Count Juneau, tomorrow I will arrange for people to deliver the sculptures to you." The attendant smiled. Only now did Count Juneau also smile.

Count Juneau flicked a glance at Count Demme, feeling scornful. "Kid. How many years have I spent analyzing stonesculpting? You don't have any insight, and you still want to bid against me?"

Chapter 6 - The Invitation

"Hrm, there were three sculptures in the main hall which sold for 1500 gold pieces each?" Austoni [Ao'Si'Tuo'Ni], a manager at the Proulx Gallery, stared at the records in astonishment. After flipping through the biographical details of the sculptor, Linley, he couldn't help but be even more amazed. "These three are all made by Linley, and he's only fifteen?"

The world of sculpture was definitely that of a pyramid.

The entire Holy Alliance had only five or six master level sculptors who stood at the peak of this field, and perhaps a hundred or so expert sculptors. From this, one could imagine how rare these experts were. Usually, someone who could be termed a 'expert sculptor' was someone who had an understanding of life and whose skill in this art was such that he could infuse this understanding into his sculptures. Only then would their sculptures have special auras.

A fifteen year old expert sculptor?

All but unheard of!

"And this Linley fellow is a student at the Ernst Institute?" Austoni was growing more and more shocked. The Ernst Institute was the number one magus academy in the entire Yulan continent. "And he is a student of the fifth class? A fifteen year old student of the fifth class?"

Austoni sucked in a cold breath.

Genius!

"Even if these three sculptures were only worth a thousand gold apiece, based on the age of the sculptor alone, the true value of these sculptures would definitely be several times greater." Austoni became absolutely convinced of this.

For a fifteen year old sculptor to be able to produce sculpture at this level meant that the value of his artwork would be exponentially greater.

For this fifteen year old sculptor to also be a student at the Ernst Institute meant that he was a genius amongst geniuses. Once again, this would multiply the value of his sculptures.

“This afternoon, I am going to the Ernst Institute. It has been quite some time since the Proulx Gallery has enrolled a new expert sculptor amongst our ranks.” Austoni made his decision. By virtue of the fact that all three of his sculptures had fetched a high price, Linley clearly had proved his worth.

He was fully qualified to be invited to have his sculptures displayed in a private booth in the hall of experts.

That very afternoon.

A horse carriage drew up outside the main gates of the Ernst Institute. It was Austoni and two guards. Arriving at the main gate, Austoni took out his identification showing himself to be a manager at the Proulx Gallery. The Ernst Institute actually deployed one of their own guards to escort him.

At the instructional areas for the fifth grade students at the Ernst Institute.

“Mr. Austoni, this is where most of the instructors for the magi of the fifth rank congregate.” Smiling, the escort pushed the door open. Currently, around ten or so magi were here, chatting and laughing. To be qualified to instruct magi of the fifth rank, one would be a magi of the seventh or perhaps even the eighth rank.”

As the door opened, these magi of exalted rank all turned to look.

“Milords, this is Mr. Austoni of the Proulx Gallery. He has some business which he would like to beseech your aid for.” The escort said respectfully.

The magi all nodded calmly.

The Proulx Gallery had multiple branches in all of the kingdoms and empires in the Yulan continent, and it possessed astonishing power and influence. Thus, even proud, arrogant magi would be fairly cordial when dealing with the Proulx Gallery.

“Milords magi.” Austoni said with a smile. “I’m here in search of a student named Linley?”

“Linley?”

All of the magi laughed. Amongst them, a purple robed magi said with a smile, “Linley? That’s one of the two utmost geniuses of the Ernst Institute. He is a dual-

element magus, wielding earth and wind. Go speak with his wind-element instructor. He might know."

"You can forget about the earth element instructor. This Linley fellow, in the past three months, has only shown his face twice in our earth element classes." A whiskered old man said unhappily. "But Linley attends virtually every single wind element class."

Another bearded elder said with a smile, "I am Linley's wind element instructor. I'm fairly knowledgeable about him. If you have any questions, you can ask me."

Austoni nodded. "A month ago, Linley brought three sculptures over to the Proulx Gallery. His sculptures already possess the grandeur of a expert. Based on the price it fetched this month, we have determined that Linley is qualified to have his sculptures displayed in a private booth in the hall of the experts. Thus, I have come to gift him with a silver magicard."

"A private booth?"

Those magi were all amazed.

These proud, lofty magi were all fairly knowledgeable when it came to sculptures. They all knew that it was extremely hard to even carve a physically perfect sculpture, much less one with a special aura or essence. To have a private booth at the Proulx Gallery was the dream of countless sculptors.

"Are you sure it was Linley? This Linley fellow is normally quite diligent and hardworking in his studies. And he is only fifteen years old." Linley's wind element instructor, that silver haired, white robed old man said disbelievingly.

Austoni smiled. "This is beyond any question. At the Proulx Gallery, we recorded down all of Linley's biographical data. And, based on our data, he came to the Proulx Gallery in the company of young master Yale."

Those magi all nodded.

And then, they all began to talk amongst themselves animatedly. One of the two utmost geniuses of the Ernst Institute was actually a expert sculptor as well. For a genius magus to be able to secure a private booth at the Proulx Gallery was something which would rarely occur even a single time over the course of a thousand years.

Naturally, these magi were all amazed.

"Milords magi, can any of you inform me where Linley is residing?" Austoni asked.

That silver haired, white robed elder said, "Linley resides in dorm 1987."

"Dorm 1987?" Hearing this, Austoni was about to head there right away.

The silver haired, white robed elder continued, "But please wait. Although Linley lives in dorm 1987, I happen to know that three weeks ago, he departed from the school to engage in training. Thus, unfortunately, I'm afraid you came here for nothing."

"Training?" Austoni started.

Austoni knew quite well that magi of the fifth and sixth ranks were qualified to engage in real world field training. The Ernst Institute also strongly encouraged this practice.

Austoni couldn't help but sigh.

He didn't expect that despite rushing to the Ernst Institute so enthusiastically, this would be the end result.

"Then milords magi, I will take my leave." Austoni bowed respectfully. Those magi all nodded casually towards him, signifying acceptance, and no longer paid him any heed. All of them began to excitedly chat amongst themselves.

"I didn't imagine that this kid Linley is so formidable..."

All of these magi instructors were unable to stop praising Linley who, without anyone knowing, was able to qualify to have a private booth at the Proulx Gallery.

Chapter 7 - The Journey (part 1)

Let us go back in time a few weeks, to June 5th.

This afternoon, Linley bid farewell to his three bros. Carrying a leather sack on his back, Linley headed on the road to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

"Squeak squeak!" The little Shadowmouse squeaked happily from his perch on Linley's shoulders.

"Boss, we're finally headed to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Wow, I'm so excited!" The little Shadowmouse's voice rang out in Linley's head. Linley just

smiled. At this time, a white ray of light shone out and transformed into Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart instructed, "Linley, when travelling alone, you must be careful. Perhaps you will meet with bandits."

"I know, Grandpa Doehring." Linley laughed.

Grandpa Doehring had already repeated his warnings over and over about the dangers of traveling solo. Right now, Linley was dressed in sturdy cloth slacks and a sleeveless shirt. Just judging from his bulging alone, anyone would definitely be certain that he was a warrior.

Per Grandpa Doehring, in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, a mage's robes would be rather unwieldy and get in the way.

Linley moved very quickly. Although the road from the Ernst Institute to the mountain range was rather rough, based on Linley's stamina as a warrior of the fourth rank, in a single hour he easily traversed forty kilometers. Just at this time, he suddenly saw three people up ahead.

"Hrm?" Linley's gaze focused on one person in particular.

That person was actually dressed in the robes of a student of the Ernst Institute. Of the other two, one was extremely muscular and bore a giant warblade on his back. The other man was extremely skinny, and had a shortsword sheathed by his side. That skinny man alertly turned his head and stared at Linley.

Linley couldn't be bothered to pay attention to them, and just sped up, preparing to pass them by.

"Linley, is that you?" A voice suddenly said.

Linley turned his head questioningly. That man dressed in the robes of a magus of the Ernst Institute smiled and called out, "Linley, I'm Delsarte [De'sha'te], remember me?"

"Oh, Delsarte, it's you!" Linley came to a halt.

Linley actually knew this Delsarte.

Delsarte, like him, was a wind magus of the fifth grade class. Although they couldn't be considered to have a deep friendship, they were classmates after all.

Delsarte brought the two warriors over, smiling as he warmly said, "Linley, I didn't expect that you, a magus, would be dressed like this. I barely recognized you. Only when I saw that little Shadowmouse on your shoulder did I realize it was you."

"Kava [Ka'wa], Matt [Ma'te], let me introduce you. This is Linley, one of the two ultimate geniuses of our Ernst Institute. He's only fifteen years old, but he is already a magus of the fifth rank." Delsarte enthusiastically introduced.

Kava was that muscularly built warrior, while Matt was the skinny warrior.

"I've long heard Delsarte talk about the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute. I didn't expect that today we would have the good fortune to meet you." Matt said courteously, while Kava's eyes widened as round as an ox. "You are a magus? Why do you look like a warrior to me?"

Linley didn't explain. "All of you are heading to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

Delsarte nodded. "Right. Kava and Matt travelled with me last year for field training. We have good teamwork. This year, we plan to do some exploration around the borders of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Linley, you should come with us. In a group, we'll all be safer."

Linley nodded.

"I'll travel with them for now. Delsarte is a classmate of mine, so he should be trustworthy. When we reach the mountains, we'll split up." After making his decision, Linley and Delsarte's trio all headed towards the mountains together.

The four of them travelled at very high speed.

Even the physically weak Delsarte was able to move rapidly through usage of the wind-style spell 'Supersonic'. Thus, their group moved quickly through the barren roads.

Kava's loud voice rumbled, "Linley, if you join with us, then we would have two magi of the fifth rank. When the four of us work together, we might even be able to kill a magical beast of the sixth rank. The magicite cores of magical beasts of the sixth rank are worth around a thousand gold apiece. If we kill a few of them, we won't have to worry about our living expenses for a century."

For most people, in a year, ten gold pieces was more than enough for living expenses.

A thousand gold coins was an enormous sum.

Linley's heart was swayed. In the back of his mind, he suddenly was reminded of the books regarding magical beasts he had read. These books had discussed the energy core all magical beasts had within them; the magicite cores.

"These magicite cores will solidify in the bodies of beasts of the third rank and higher. But for beasts which have not reached the sixth rank, the value of the cores is not high. They probably aren't even worth as much as one of my sculptures." Linley thought to himself.

However, the magicite cores of magical beasts of the sixth rank were still only worth about a thousand gold.

Based on Doehring Cowart's calculations, Linley's sculptures were definitely qualified to be displayed in the hall of the masters, with a valuation of around a thousand gold or so each. Killing a magical beast of the sixth rank, in terms of difficulty and danger, was something that was far deadlier than sculpting.

"At the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, my primary goal is to train myself. Acquiring magicite crystals? That's just a side benefit." Linley said to himself as he looked at the other three.

Delsarte and the others were engaged in enthusiastic speculation. Clearly, they were very excited about acquiring magicite cores.

"The magicite cores of magical beasts of the third, fourth, and fifth ranks aren't worth much. Even cores from beasts of the sixth rank are just worth a thousand or so." Delsarte said, shaking his head unconcernedly. "If we can kill a magical beast of the seventh rank, then we will be rich." When he said these words, Delsarte's eyes gleamed.

Just like humans, where between magi of the sixth rank to the seventh rank was a huge gap, magical beasts of the sixth rank had a huge gap in power compared to magical beasts of the seventh rank.

The magicite cores of a magical beast of the seventh rank were worth tens of thousands of gold pieces.

If they could kill just one, in the countryside, they would be considered extremely wealthy and not have to worry about money for the rest of their lives.

"A magical beast of the seventh rank? Based on our ability, that would be a deathwish." Linley said casually.

Linley had witnessed the power of the Velocidragon, a magical beast of the seventh rank. Linley, at his current rank, probably couldn't even break through the Velocidragon's terrifyingly protective scales. If he couldn't even pierce its defense, how could he possibly try to kill a magical beast of the seventh rank? How was that possible?

That sly-looking fellow, Matt, nodded. "It's hard to say if the four of us would even be able to defeat a magical beast of the sixth rank. Fighting with a magical beast of the seventh rank is suicide."

"I'm just making small talk." Delsarte rubbed his head as he pursed his lips.

Just as the four of them were talking and laughing, in a mountain forest a hundred meters behind them, a man wearing green clothes and with leaves covered all over his face was staring coldly at them.

This man's mouth was moving nonstop, apparently mumbling the words to a magical spell.

At the same time, the longbow in his hands had been pulled to the limit. Suddenly, the arrow shot out, flashing with a cold blue light. It tore through the air at a terrifyingly rapid speed, traversing the hundred meters in the blink of an eye.

Linley, who was engaging in idle talk with the group, suddenly felt all the hairs on his body stand up. His heart immediately reached a maximum level of tension.

"Danger!"

Linley quickly dodged to the side. "Whooosh!" That high speed arrow shot past him like a bolt of lightning, piercing through the body of the robed Delsarte. It pierced through his torso, leaving behind a gaping hole as it flew another few dozen meters before halting.

Clutching his throat, Delsarte's eyes turned round. Some indistinct words gargled in his mouth as fresh blood spewed forth from the wound in his chest.

"Urg...urg..." Delsarte's eyes were filled with a longing for life. They were filled with horror and fear, but as the blood continued to pour out from the gaping hole in his chest, quite quickly, all life fled from Delsarte's eyes, and he collapsed.

Linley, Kava, and Matt all quickly flattened themselves against the grass as they alertly looked behind them.

Chapter 8- The Journey (part 2)

"A wind-element magus-archer. Based on how that arrow of his melded both the 'Supersonic' and 'Precision' spells, this wind-element magus-archer must have at least reached the fifth rank." Doebring Cowart's voice rang out in Linley's mind. "Based on this fellow's prowess, if he gets within fifty meters of you, even if you are able to dodge, you will still suffer a severe injury. Flee!"

Linley's heart trembled.

"Give up all your valuables, and I'll spare your lives." A cold voice rang out, and then over ten men dressed in dark green burst out of the forest. All of them were wielding longbows, with shortswords at their waists. These ten people stared coldly at Linley and the other two while pressing closer and closer.

But the speaker did not appear.

Linley and the others glanced at each other. They didn't hand over their valuables. They only watched warily as the archers approached.

"Fire!" That cold voice rang out again. The wind-element magus behind them was quite decisive. Since Linley and the other two didn't immediately surrender, he immediately issued the order to kill.

"Twang" "twang" "twang" "twang".

With abruptness, the archers all shot their arrows, and the arrows soared towards Linley's group, who hurriedly dodged. In addition to dodging, Kava also used the huge warblade in his hands to block some arrows.

Linley executed the wind-style spell 'Supersonic', allowing himself to dodge aside easily while still maintaining enough presence of mind to watch the other two. Matt was dodging nonstop, quite precise and quite careful, while also using his shortsword to deflect arrows.

But Kava was not as agile. While wielding a giant warblade, he clearly could not move very quickly. He was primarily using his giant warblade as well as a thin layer of battle-qi to defend himself. And indeed, the threat of those arrows was not too high; a warrior of the fifth rank could withstand them.

"Raaawr, die!" Kava roared furiously, charging forward towards the archers with his warblade in hand.

Seeing this, a killing gaze appeared in the eyes of the wind-style magus-archer hiding in the forest. He once more drew the bowstring to his longbow and began to chant the words to the 'Supersonic' and 'Precision' spells, causing his longbow and arrow to glitter with gold and blue light.

Roaring furiously, Kava continued charging towards the archers, but halfway there, he suddenly sensed a blue gleam flash before him. Before he was able to react, the arrow was right there, in front of him, terrifying him to the point that cold sweat instantly drenched his clothes. He immediately lifted up his giant warblade to block. But however...

"Argh!"

The arrow pierced straight into his skull.

"Ah..." Kava stood there stupidly, his eyes filled with disbelief. He clearly had been able to use his warblade to block the arrow. How did it kill him? His eyes filled with disbelief and questions, all the light faded from his gaze and he toppled down, like a collapsing mountain.

The far away Linley felt his heart tremble.

"The wind-style supportive spell, 'Precision'. It really is precise!" As a wind-style magus, Linley knew very well that this supportive spell, 'Precision', when used to support an archer, could cause the archer's arrows to undergo minute course corrections enroute to its target.

For example, just now, Kava did indeed get his warblade up in time to block, but just by adjusting its direction slightly, the arrow went straight through Kava's skull.

"Wind-style magic, when paired with a longbow, really is terrifying." Linley felt secretly shocked, but in the next instant, he immediately began to chant the words to a magical spell.

"The two of you had best surrender obediently." That cold voice rang out once more from the forest, and the ten or so archers also laughed arrogantly. A wind-style magus-archer required both powerful magical abilities as well as sufficient physical strength to utilize a longbow properly.

A wind-style magus-archer was an extremely terrifying long-range attacker.

A murderous gaze flashing through Linley's eyes, as he stared at those ten archers as though they were just corpses.

“Crack!” “Crack!” “Crack!” “Crack!”

Suddenly, the earth trembled, and one earthen spear after another erupted from beneath the ten archers. One sharp, gleaming stone spear after another pierced into the legs and chests of the archers, filling the ground with fresh blood and the air with their screams.

Earth-style spell of the fifth rank – Earthen Spear Array!

“Ahhh!” Miserable cries split the air.

Dozens of earthen spears had erupted simultaneously from beneath them, each spear over a meter high. In the blink of an eye, the troop was pierced by the dense array of spears, which had caught them unawares, like a devastating ambush. All of the ten archers entered a state of pain and despair.

“Leader, save us, save us!” A man who had been impaled in the stomach cried out miserably.

“Ah, ah!” Another archer who had been pierced through in his thighs also cried out with pain.

Of the troop of archers, four died on the spot, while nearly ten of them were severely injured. Their combat ability had essentially been destroyed.

“An earth-style magus!”

The archer hidden in the woods felt greatly shocked. Him and his men had been hidden here, on the outskirts of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, for quite some time now, ambushing and killing travelers, and had accumulated quite a bit of treasure.

Generally, when he launched his ambush, he would first kill the enemy’s magus!

An enemy magus, after all, could also launch long range attacks. Therefore, they posed the greatest risk. He didn’t expect that after killing one magus, another one would show himself.

“Let’s go.”

Taking advantage of his opponent’s being caught off guard, Linley immediately utilized the ‘Supersonic’ spell to increase his speed to its maximum limits, hurriedly scurrying away and disappearing off into the distance. Linley knew quite well that he had no way to attack the magus-archer hiding in the woods.

Their distance was too great, and even magic had range limitations. But if he closed in on the magus-archer, he perhaps wouldn't be able to block the assault of a wind-element magus-archer.

Running away at maximum speed, Linley fled nearly thirty kilometers.

"Boss, why'd you run away? That magus-archer might've posed some risk to you, but if I were to attack, I would've killed his *** easy. Why didn't you let me kill'm?" The little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' mentally grumbled angrily to Linley.

Linley knew quite well how powerful the little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' had become.

When Linley was just eight years old, the little Shadowmouse already had a speed surpassing that of a warrior of the sixth rank. But seven years later, with Linley fifteen years of age, although Bebe's physical size had not changed, his speed was almost on par with that of a warrior of the ninth rank!

Based on the little Shadowmouse's speed, that magus-archer probably wouldn't even be able to aim at him.

"This is my training excursion. I should try to resolve everything based on my own ability." Linley explained.

Jumping onto Linley's shoulders, the little Shadowmouse scratched at Linley as angry squeaking sounds came from his sharp teeth. Mentally, he was angrily shouting at Linley, "Boss, you are going too far! I also need to train, I also need to fight!"

Looking at the little Shadowmouse, Linley couldn't help but laugh. "Fine, when we reach the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, if we run into any powerful monsters, I'll let you fight them, deal?"

"That's more like it." The little Shadowmouse sat up, folding his little paws over his chest. His little nose wrinkled as he beamed happily.

Just at this moment, the dark, grim sky was shattered with a 'crash' as bolts of lightning lit up the world, followed by the echoing thunder.

"Looks like it's going to storm hard soon." Linley frowned.

Linley immediately sped up, hastening towards the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. By the time Linley was just ten or so kilometers away from the mountains, the first drops rain began to fall, followed by torrential showers which flooded the land.

“Rumble...”

The sound of thunder sounded out again and again, while the torrential rain continued to cover the lands with water. It felt as though the entire world had been flooded.

But not much rain fell on Linley, who continued to forge ahead with rapid speed. This was because ten centimeters above Linley, there was a ‘wind shield’ of approximately one meter in diameter. The defensive ability of the ‘wind shield’ spell was quite high. Linley only had to use a tiny bit of mageforce in order to allow it to block the rain constantly.

As the wind itself was formless, the wind shield, as well, appeared like just a translucent, faint blue streak.

From far away, one simply couldn’t tell that there was a wind shield there. Thus, using this wind shield, Linley rapidly forged ahead. After a bit of time, Linley saw a long, sinuous range of mountains, running north to south with no end in sight. This mountain range, which virtually split the Yulan continent into two halves, was the number one mountain range in the world – the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Seeing the titanic mountains just a few kilometers away, Linley couldn’t help but hold his breath.

“What a huge mountain range...”

This mountain range was simply too enormous. Based on the naked eye, as far as one could tell, the mountains were limitless, and as far north and as far south as one could see, there were mountains. Seeing the boundless mountains in this mountain range was like seeing the boundless water in the sea.

It stretched into infinity!

“This is the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the number one mountain range in the continent. How many magical beasts does it hold? How many Saint-level magical beasts, for that matter?” At this moment, Doehring Cowart appeared by Linley’s side, his gaze distant and lofty. “It has been a long time since I have come to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.”

A look of excitement shone from Linley’s eyes.

“Let’s go!”

Filled with a heroic air, Linley charged through the all-encompassing rainstorm towards the mountain range, while the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, squeaked excitedly from Linley's shoulders. Under the cover of the rainstorm, Linley quickly entered the endless mountains.

Chapter 9 - The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts (part 1)

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was vast and boundless.

Within it, Linley could see ancient pines that were centuries or millennia old, blotting out the landscape. All sorts of various grasses filled the land, and thistles and thorns were equally commonplace. Dry leaves covered the land, with each step, they crackled and popped. Ancient vines and weeds could be seen everywhere.

"With all of these weeds, dense vines, and trees which have been around for who-knows-how-long, even if a magical beast were just ten meters away from me, I still probably wouldn't sense it." Linley grew apprehensive.

Grandpa Doehring appeared by his side as well.

"Ten meters? Linley, even in the grass right in front of you, there could be a magical beast in wait, such as a giant snake." Doehring Cowart laughed as he spoke.

Linley involuntarily glanced at the grassy area in front of him, which was almost half as tall as him. Such thick, tall grass really could hide a snake. Taking a deep breath, Linley stood there as he began to mumble the words to a spell.

Suddenly, a gentle gust of wind emanated from Linley, spreading about in all directions before finally dissipating.

Wind-style magic – Windscout!

Generally speaking, a magus of the third rank would be able to execute the Windscout spell. But of course, the more powerful a magus was, the wider an area the Windscout spell could cover. The Windscout spell of a magus of the third rank would only affect an area of around ten or so meters around him, but the Windscout of a magus of the fifth rank had a diameter of over a hundred meters.

"Within a hundred meters, the only magical beasts around are a magical beast of the first rank, a Bubblerat, and a few magical beasts of the second rank, 'Earth Scorpions'." Linley said confidently.

The Windscout spell could discern the aura and lifescent of any living creature.

“Don’t be too cocky. A powerful magical beast could burrow under the earth, and some Saint-level magical beasts can even disguise their power level.” Doehring Cowart reminded, but then he chuckled. “But of course, if they wanted to deal with a little fellow like you, would a Saint-level magical beast bother to hide its power?”

But upon hearing these words, Linley grew all the more cautious.

“Ambush through disguising power levels? In some books, it was said that the intelligence of magical beasts rivals that of man’s. Looks like it’s true.” Linley said to himself. Glancing at the little Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’, on his shoulders, he thought, “This little fella, Bebe, already has a really high level of intelligence. I can’t let my guard down.”

Air swirled around Linley’s feet. This was part of the byproduct of Linley’s ‘Supersonic’ spell.

Linley quietly passed into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. He carefully surveyed his surroundings, while on his shoulders, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also perked up and stared in all four directions, his beady little black eyes peering about him. Slowly, the two of them travelled deeper and deeper into the mountains.

“The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is over ten thousand kilometers long, with an average width of seven or eight hundred kilometers. In the outermost hundred kilometer region, the magical beasts are mostly of low rank. If we go more than a hundred kilometers deep, we’ll meet lots of magical beasts of the fifth and sixth ranks. If we go still deeper inside, we will see many beasts of the seventh, eighth, and ninth ranks, and perhaps even Saint-level magical beasts.”

Doehring Cowart once more began to lecture Linley about the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

“But of course, nothing is absolute. Perhaps a magical beast of the ninth rank might be bored and go for a stroll in the outer territories.” Doehring Cowart said. “And perhaps you might be so unlucky as to meet with a huge, ten-thousand unit strong pack of wolf monsters. If that happens, all I can say is, you have terrible karma.”

Hearing Doehring Cowart’s words, Linley’s lips pursed.

That went without saying!

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was enormous. How could he be so unlucky? But if he was, Doehring Cowart, who survived only as a spirit, would not be able to

assist him in any way. A Saint-level Grand Magus without mageforce had no way to attack.

“Grandpa Doehring, I know this already. Be quiet and don’t distract me.” Linley said discontentedly.

Doehring Cowart immediately chuckled. Stroking his white beard, he no longer spoke.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was a place of deep mountains and ancient trees. The trees were so thickly clustered that virtually all of the rain was blocked, with just a few drops occasionally sprinkling down. After walking for a period of time, he realized that this outer region was indeed not that dangerous.

Linley exerted some strength with his legs, and almost as if he were floating, leapt up on top of a seven or eight meter high tree branch as he carefully scanned about.

“Boss, far away to the right, there’s a wild pig.” Bebe’s voice sounded out in Linley’s mind.

Hearing these words, Linley couldn’t help but turn and look. Indeed, approximately a hundred meters away, a wild boar with a single horn was carefully scanning his surroundings. If Linley didn’t have such a high vantage point, Linley perhaps wouldn’t have been able to see this Unicorn Boar.

“Unicorn Boar, a magical beast of the third rank, an earth-element creature. The only technique it has is that of the ‘Earth Spear’ technique.” Some information regarding the Unicorn Boar came to Linley’s mind.

“Even though it’s just a beast of the third rank, at least it will serve for dinner. Boar flesh is quite tasty.” Nimblly and vigorously, Linley crept through the trees as he stealthily approached the boar. Due to the density of the local flora, the boar had not noticed Linley either.

When he got within ten meters of the boar, Linley lay down flat in the grass. Peering through the dense grass, he could still make out the outline of the Unicorn Boar.

Whoosh!

Like a serpentine dragon leaving its lair, Linley leapt out from the grass. When the Unicorn Boar turned his head and stared in shock, Linley fell down upon it like a gust of wind. The Unicorn Boar let out an indignant roar, and thrust its long, thick horn straight at Linley.

"Hrrg!" Linley reached out with his left hand and grabbed the horn and gave a tremendous tug.

That huge Unicorn Boar, weighing several hundred kilograms, was tossed up seven or eight meters up into the air by Linley, who then began to fiercely kick at it with his left leg, using it like a giant claymore and slamming it into the boar's head with thunderous power and speed.

"Thud." With a sickening, bone-crunching sound, the Unicorn Boar was kicked into a tree. When it fell down to the ground, the very earth shook. The bones of the Unicorn Boar had already been shattered, and brain matter had already begun leaking out from its shattered skull. A trail of fresh blood streamed forth from its mouth. Its four limbs quivered momentarily, then grew still.

Just based on his prowess as a warrior, killing a Unicorn Boar was not a tough feat for Linley.

"Although the magicite core of a magical beast of the third rank is only worth ten or so gold coins, I can't let it go to waste." Linley withdrew the straight chisel from his backpack, and with just two or three simple slices, he cut the boar open. An entirely unremarkable earth-colored magicite crystal rolled out. Linley wiped it off on the grass, then placed it in his backpack.

And then, with practiced ease, Linley skinned the boar and cut off the boar's legs.

After casually chopping down a few branches, with a flick of his wrist, Linley summoned forth a small flame. As the fire began to grow, Linley began to roast the boar legs.

The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, began to drool. His eyes were fixed on the boar legs. "Boar legs are delicious. Boss, hurry up, hurry up. Why don't you just directly use your fire-element magic to roast the boar, wouldn't that be faster?"

"Fire-element magic? I only have a bit of fire element mageforce. And what's more, when it comes to cooking, using higher temperatures isn't necessarily superior." Linley smirked as he spoke, withdrawing some coarse salt and other ingredients from his backpack.

When Linley had originally tested for magical aptitude, he had exceptional affinity for both earth and wind elemental essence, but just average affinity for fire elemental essence. Honestly speaking, for an ordinary person, average affinity for an elemental essence was quite good. But for someone like Linley, he couldn't be bothered to spend time and energy working on his fire magic.

After all, if he wanted his abilities in fire magic to match his abilities in wind and earth, he would probably have to spend ten times as much time.

Thus, Linley would usually just casually refine a little bit of fire element mageforce. He did, however, definitely have enough to generate some fireballs without any problems.

After finishing roasting two boar legs, Linley and Bebe each shared one while Linley began to work on roasting the other two.

“Wow. Delicious.” Bebe chatted while eating enthusiastically. “This wild boar tastes so much better than those farm-grown hogs. It tastes so fragrant. But naturally, your roasting abilities also played a big role, boss.” Bebe was so happy that he even began flattering Linley a bit.

Linley couldn’t help but start to laugh.

“Boss, I want more.” After finishing one leg, Bebe looked at Linley with a pitiful expression.

Seeing Bebe’s sad gaze, Linley didn’t feel sorry for him in the slightest. He sternly lectured, “This boar leg is way larger than a roast duck. One leg is more than enough for you. The other two legs will be dinner.” After speaking, Linley turned away and ignored Bebe’s pitiable face.

After finishing roasting the two legs, Linley used two large leaves to wrap them up, and then placed them within his backpack and began hurrying along the road with Bebe.

Chapter 10- The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts (part 2)

Within the countless peaks of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts were innumerable ageless trees and forests that made travel through the range very difficult. What made it even more difficult was the constant need to pass through one peak and ravine after another, or perhaps take a circular path.

“When traveling within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, don’t carve out a path through the pre-existing thorns and brush. It’s best to take an alternate path.” Doehring Cowart continued to provide the benefit of his experience to Linley.

Linley listened carefully as he proceeded forward.

"Remember, the biggest mistake you can make in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is to constantly make noise. This will cause many magical beasts to pay attention to you. Even if you are forced to make some noise, you need to immediately leave the nearby area." Doehring Cowart continued. "Remember, if you are injured, you must immediately do your best to staunch any loss of blood. The stench of blood will attract beasts as well. The noses of magical beasts are far more sensitive than we humans."

Linley nodded.

The massive crowns of countless trees covered the entire sky. Looking at them, Linley was reminded of some information that he had gleaned from books at the Ernst Institute. In a place like this, where even the sun was all but blocked out, one had to learn how to distinguish north, south, east, and west.

As agile as a monkey, Linley leapt past a series of disorderly tree roots and vine growths, but just as he walked past...

"Whoah." Linley sucked in a cold breath as he saw something not too far away.

The corpses of three men and two women were a few dozen meters away from him. The five corpses had not yet rotted much, but the bite marks on them were very visible. The corpses had all been dismembered. A male corpse had half its leg eaten, and a giant hole ripped in its belly, with his severed intestines laying strewn about. Half of a female corpse's head had been eaten, leaving behind a single eyeball and a white skull bone with a few strands of hair attached.

Linley's face turned pale, and he forgot to breathe.

"They should've died three or four days ago." Doehring Cowart appeared next to Linley, carefully inspecting the corpses. His face was still quite calm. "Linley, take a close look. On the chest of every single person, there are some similar, unremarkable wounds. If my guess is correct, these five should've been killed by humans, and most likely, by a single person."

Linley started.

"Doehring Cowart, you're saying that a person killed them?" Linley looked at Doehring Cowart, shocked.

Doehring Cowart smiled calmly. "Linley, this is your first visit to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Once you've been here a bit longer, you will come to realize that in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, in addition to dealing with the attacks of local beasts, you also have to guard against the attacks of other humans."

"The attacks of humans? Why would other humans attack?" Linley felt a bit of rage beginning to grow in his heart.

In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the local monsters already held a huge advantage by virtue of their countless numbers. He didn't expect that the humans here would fight amongst themselves as well, instead of helping each other.

"This is very normal. Why do humans venture into this mountain range? The vast majority come here in the hopes of acquiring magicite cores. If they kill a magical beast, they will only acquire a single core, but if they kill a human being, that person might have several magicite cores in their backpack, or even more." Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard.

Linley finally understood.

Greed!

It was all due to greed. Some people here wanted to easily acquire a large number of magicite cores, and indeed, killing the other human beings here was a good way to do so.

"Linley, you must be careful. Based on what I'm seeing, the person who killed these five must possess astounding ability. If you look closely at these people's clothing, you can see that four of them should be warriors, while one of them was a magus. But all five of them were killed at about the same time by a clean blow through the heart. The ruthless precision of this assault is chilling. However, since we don't know how strong these five people were, it's hard to estimate the strength of their killer." Doehring Cowart frowned. "But for these five to be willing and able to brave the dangers of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts suggests that they were not weak. From this alone, we can safely say that the person who killed them is, at the very least, no weaker than you."

Linley stepped forward to take a closer look, then nodded in agreement.

The killing blows were very clean and direct.

"This is still just the outer perimeter of the mountain range. Hurry on in." Doehring Cowart laughed.

Linley nodded, then continued on his journey deeper into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. On his journey, the sight of corpses of both men and monsters became quite common, as well as many rusted weapons. Linley also occasionally ran into a few weak monsters.

Nightfall. Linley and the little Shadowmouse were resting while each munched on a leg of boar. Linley was seated on the ground, while the little Shadowmouse was seated on his shoulder.

"At night, one cannot light a fire in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts." Doehring Cowart once again instructed.

"Understood, Grandpa Doehring." Linley knew quite a bit about the basics of survival here. This place was no ordinary wilderness, and the beasts here would not be afraid of fire.

Seated on the ground, Linley calmed himself down and closed his eyes, while beginning to sense the flow of earth essence and wind essence around him. The feeling of elemental essence around him was akin to the feeling of being in one's parents' embrace.

Due to his exceptional affinity with earth essence and wind essence, Linley could sense them quite clearly.

"The Pulse of the Earth. The Flow of the Wind." A peaceful smile was on Linley's face, as he began to drift off into sleep. Linley had total confidence that any tremors on the ground caused by something approaching, or any disturbances in the wind caused by something moving rapidly to him, would immediately awaken him.

These were the abilities possessed by earth magi and wind magi.

The night slowly grew deeper. Curled in front of Linley, the little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' also began to emit extremely light, quiet snoring sounds. The night wind grew cool as well, but right now, it was summer in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Only at night would it feel cool and refreshing. In the day, it felt stiflingly hot.

Late at night. All was dark.

"Rustle, rustle." The soft sounds of something rustling against the grass could be heard.

A pair of powerfully built Windwolves with gleaming blue fur were pacing about within the forest. Their green-tinted eyes were carefully inspecting their surroundings as their powerful limbs silently stalked through the area.

Their cruel white fangs gleamed with a cold light in the night.

Chapter 11 - Wolf Pack (part 1)

Still seated cross-legged, Linley's eyes suddenly snapped open and he immediately stared southwards. But there was nothing to the south aside from a mass of vines and rattan growth. This was one of the reasons why Linley selected this location for resting. With so much forest growth, even if a magical beast neared Linley, they might not notice him.

"Two magical beasts are nearing me, and right now they are around forty meters or so away." Based on the vibrations from the disturbances in the local air elemental essences, Linley was certain that there were two beasts.

Linley silently walked to the edge of the mass of vines. Peering through the vines, he saw that thirty meters away, a pair of powerfully built Windwolves were slowly pawing towards him. Based on their route, they would come very close to him. Suddenly, Linley felt a weight settle on his shoulders, and he knew that Bebe had already arrived on his shoulders.

"Boss, it's just a pair of Windwolves. We've seen them several times at the Ernst Institute." Not worried in the slightest, Bebe chatted casually with Linley.

Linley's gaze was fixed on the two Windwolves. "Yes, they are Windwolves. Amongst the wolf packs, there are three major types: Fangwolves, Windwolves, and Frostwolves. Frostwolf packs are the strongest type, while Fangwolves are the weakest. Windwolves are squarely in the middle. In a pack of Windwolves, even the weakest will be a magical beast of the fourth rank, while elites might be of the fifth or sixth rank. Supposedly, the strongest a Windwolf can be is a magical beast of the eighth rank."

Even an ordinary Windwolf was of the fourth rank. A Unicorn Boar simply wasn't on the same level.

My power as a warrior is just of the fourth rank. Based on physical skills alone, I can't overcome these two Windwolves." Linley was feeling a bit excited. "But this will make it a challenge."

Watching the two Windwolves draw nearer, Linley's lips began to mumble the words to a magic spell as his eyes grew cold.

"Shrrrk! Shrrk! Shrrrrk! Shrrrk!"

A deep roar noise could be heard as within the dark night, ten or so large rocks, each at least one meter long and earthen-colored, suddenly flew towards the Windwolves,

smashing at them. But the Windwolves quickly raised their head. Seeing the danger, they immediately began to flee at high speed.

The low thud of an impact.

In the short period of time before the rocks struck, the Windwolves were able to respond with uncanny swiftness. Of the two Windwolves, one had a back leg smashed, while the other managed to adroitly dodge every single rock.

“They live up to the name of ‘Windwolves’. They are so fast!”

Linley thought to himself, even as he began mumbling the words to another spell, the wind-style ‘Supersonic’ spell. Simultaneously, he pulled out his straight chisel blade, then charged directly forward at high speed at that injured, retreating Windwolf.

A warrior of the fourth rank, aided by the Supersonic spell, had roughly the same level of speed as the uninjured Windwolf. Naturally, the injured one was much slower than Linley. The injured wolf frantically fled in terror while baring its fangs.

“Swish! Swish! Swish!”

A string of knives of air appeared out of nowhere and hacked at Linley.

“Hrmph, all wolves have heads as hard as copper and tails as hard as steel, but their waists are as soft as tofu.”

Linley was extremely agile. With three simple motions, he dodged the wind knives and drew even closer to the injured Windwolf. Like a tornado, Linley kicked out with his left leg, snapping forward viciously like a whip onto the Windwolf’s waist.

“Woooo!” The Windwolf was sent flying by the kick, and he let out an agonized howl.

With another step, Linley once again drew close to the injured Windwolf. The straight chisel in his hand flashing with a beautiful, cold, pitiless light, he chopped at the Windwolf’s chest. Linley felt as though the straight chisel in his hand had struck a tough, resilient cloth. He was only able to just barely cut through, causing blood to spurt out.

“The Windwolf’s waist is fairly weak, but its fur is quite tough. Or perhaps a better way to put it is my straight chisel isn’t sharp enough. It can cut through simple stone, but the fur and skin of a magical beast of the fourth rank is a tougher matter.” Linley thought to himself as he carefully kept his gaze on the other Windwolf.

The other Windwolf didn't actually move. It was just standing there, staring at Linley. Within its cold green eyes was a murderous aura, and low growls were constantly coming from its maw.

"If the Windwolf isn't injured, then just based on my prowess as a warrior of the fourth rank, there's no way I can kill him. That's just a dream." Linley knew quite well that Windwolves specialized in speed. If he hadn't been assisted by a wind magic spell, he wouldn't be able to match it in speed.

Linley immediately began to mumble the words to another spell, but halfway through, his face suddenly changed.

"Not good!"

The low howl of the Windwolf echoed in all directions, and it was matched by howls from all directions as well. Linley swept his gaze across the area, and as he did, it was met by one pair of cold green eyes after another, hidden in the darkness.

"It isn't just one Windwolf...it's a pack!"

Linley's heart immediately tightened. Even Bebe, who up til now had just been sitting off to the side and feigning boredom, sat up, all his fur straightening as well as he carefully looked in all directions.

"Boss, looks like it's getting dangerous."

"Grandpa Doehring, your prediction was way too prescient..." A bitter expression was on Linley's face.

In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, running into a pack of Windwolves was just as lethal as running into an extremely powerful magical beast.

"Prescient my ***. I was talking about encountering a pack of tens of thousands of Windwolves. In a situation like that, unless you can fly, there's no way you'll be able to survive. The current situation is a bit better. At most, there's twenty or thirty of them." Doehring Cowart's voice was casual, but his face was solemn. "But Linley, you must understand, I'm just a spirit without any mageforce. I can't help you. It's all up to you."

Linley felt miserable.

"Twenty or thirty Windwolves, all at least of the fourth rank. Windwolves are very fast, and they can use magical attacks. I'm just a magus of the fifth rank." Linley felt

enormous pressure. Right at this moment, the howls of the surrounding Windwolves ceased.

From within the pack of Windwolves, two exceedingly powerfully built Windwolves strode out. In terms of size, they were at least one size category larger than the previous Windwolves Linley had seen. The one which had been lucky enough to survive was respectfully walking besides these two, and even whining in a low voice, saying something to them.

Their body and even their eyes were a full category larger than the others. This made Linley feel even more nervous as he began to consider what to do next.

“These are definitely elites amongst Windwolves. At the very least, they are of the fifth rank. I hope they aren’t of the sixth rank!” Linley’s heart was tight, and he quickly began to contemplate how to deal with these opponents.

Even if they were just of the fifth rank, a pair of Windwolves of the fifth rank, with the assistance of a pack of magical beasts of the fourth rank, all attacking Linley...Linley didn’t feel too confident. Even a Windwolf of the fourth rank had the same speed as Linley’s absolute maximum. Most likely, even using the Supersonic spell, Linley would not be able to match a Windwolf of the fifth rank in speed.

The two leading Windwolves stared at Linley with their cold eyes, a murderous intent emanating from them.

“Looks like I’ll have to go all out this time.” Surrounded by a pack of wolves, Linley’s forehead and back were all drenched with cold sweat. His heart tight in his chest, he began to chant a magical spell with even greater speed.

“Hooooooowl!”

Of the two clear leaders of the pack, one of them suddenly let out a low howl. Immediately, the twenty or thirty powerful Windwolves charged forward, as fast as the wind. Their white fangs bared, they snarled at Linley as they ran. At the same time, over a hundred deep green blades of wind appeared out of nowhere, carrying great power within each blade.

Chapter 12 - Wolf Pack (part 2)

Linley was currently surrounded by around twenty Windwolves, and over a hundred deep green blades of air virtually locked Linley in, preventing him from fleeing.

There was no way to flee!

Linley suddenly moved. At high speed, he launched off the ground and, like an arrow, shot up in the air, aiming to land on a sturdy tree branch. But because there were simply too many wind blades, over ten of them still landed on Linley's body.

“Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!”

The wind blades slashed at Linley's sturdy leather armor, knocking him off course midair. Linley frantically grasped at a thick tree branch, and with a somersault, flipped onto the tree and began to climb up. Only after hurriedly climbing up twenty or thirty meters did he come to a halt and look downwards.

“That was really dangerous.”

Linley let out a breath. Right now, Linley's body was suffused with a layer of stone-like armor which was in turn covered by a layer of earth elemental essence emanated a faint rocky glow.

Earth-style magic: Earthguard!

The Earthguard required the user to at least be a magus of the fifth rank. When magi of the fifth and sixth ranks used this spell, they used a large amount of earth elemental essence to form a rocky armor which had fairly strong defensive abilities. It could defend against multiple attacks from an opponent of the same level.

These wind knife spells only possessed the strength of the third or fourth ranks.

“Roaar!” A fierce howl split the air.

Linley stared downwards, and saw that the wind was beginning to gather beneath the feet of those twenty Windwolves. All of them suddenly leapt up into the air, with the two leaders managing to leap up ten meters, landing on a large branch. Their powerful talons dug into the branch, giving them a very stable footing.

Windwolves possessed a tremendous sense of balance, so climbing trees was actually not too hard for them.

“I'm not afraid of you guys climbing trees. I'm only afraid that you wouldn't climb up.” Linley felt the blood in his veins begin to boil. The more dangerous the situation was, the more potentially lethal it was, the more excited Linley got.

In terms of climbing ability, Windwolves were somewhat inferior to humans. Linley agilely clambered from one tree to another, while the pack of Windwolves howled with fury as they gave chase.

In the outer regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, a pack of Windwolves was definitely the most powerful organization around. Even most warriors of the sixth rank, when faced with a pack of Windwolves, would elect to retreat. After all, no matter how tough they were, physically, even the body of a warrior of the sixth rank could not stand a direct blow from a Windwolf's claws.

Linley and the twenty or so Windwolves thus began a game of hide and seek on the trees. The two Windwolf leaders were faster than Linley, and so Linley had no choice but to constantly change direction to dodge. Suddenly, the leading Windwolves shot out numerous wind blades, and Linley immediately was forced to change direction to dodge.

“Crack!” A tree trunk was severed by the wind knives, and the tree began to topple.

“Crash!”

The claws of one of the leading Windwolves reached Linley, raking at his back. The Earthguard armor trembled a few times, and the elemental essence flashed and flickered.

“Crash! Crash! Crash!”

The Windwolf leaders were simply too fast, and they were also extremely agile. Their fierce claws reached Linley's back several times, as well as his head and other extremities, but fortunately, because the Earthguard armor was formed from elemental essence, it could be manipulated in terms of shape. Linley was currently using it to form a helmet as well. But under the repeated assault from the Windwolf leaders, the elemental essence on top of the armor was starting to flicker.

“These Windwolf leaders are simply too fast. The Earthguard armor won't hold much longer.”

Grinding his teeth, Linley climbed higher and higher up. By weight, he was much lighter than the Windwolves, and his climbing abilities were also superior. By the time Linley reached the height of around eighty meters, the Windwolves could no longer climb any higher. All they could do was spit out one wind knife after another at Linley. Linley dodged the best he could; only if he absolutely couldn't dodge did he allow his Earthguard to take the blow.

"If you fell from such a height, wouldn't you die?" Linley was murmuring the words to a magic spell. To be able to maintain his calm under such a dangerous situation was something Linley accomplished thanks to constantly training his mental fortitude.

"Crash!"

A wind knife smashed against the Earthguard armor. Previously teetering at the edge of destruction, the Earthguard armor finally broke apart into countless specks of elemental essence, sparkling in the air. This knife was immediately followed by another one, which Linley detected right away.

"Most wind knife spells from these wolves are equivalent to a third level magus spell. They won't be able to kill me, given that I'm a warrior of the fourth rank." Linley continued to chant the words to his spell, allowing the wind knife to slash his body. "Swish, swish." Blood erupted from the slash, as a terrifying wound appeared on Linley's chest, leaking fresh blood.

Linley only frowned slightly, continuing to chant the words to his spell.

"Whoosh!" "Whoosh!" "Whoosh!" "Whoosh!"

Over a hundred sharp rocks coalesced, gleaming with earth elemental essence. The densely packed stones shot out at the twenty Windwolves, with thirty stones centered on the heads of the two leading Windwolves. Both of the Windwolf leaders were knocked to the ground. The stones were simply too densely packed. With one crashing sound after another, the Windwolves were knocked to the ground, one after another. Even the tree branches were smashed through as they fell.

After using this technique, the vast majority of the Windwolves were smashed to the ground. But these Windwolves were very agile, and their fur was very thick. Although they were smashed downwards, many of them managed to get a clawhold on a tree branch, while others just suffered some superficial injuries. None of them died.

"This injury looks bad, but it's actually just a skin wound. Still, I can't let it keep on bleeding like this." Linley's left hand suddenly blazed with flame, and then he pressed it against his wounds. A crackling sound could be heard, and Linley couldn't help but wince and suck in a deep breath. The smell of cooking flesh wafted out from Linley's chest. Just like that, Linley had 'sealed' the wound with flame, leaving behind a very ugly scar.

While doing the above, Linley also took the opportunity to quickly flee, jumping from one tree branch to another. In the blink of an eye, he fled very far, and then

directly threw himself towards the ground. Linley directly fell around eighty or so meters, but as his body was surrounded by a flow of air, his speed of descent was not too fast. By the time he reached the ground, Linley had already finished mumbling the words to yet another spell.

That pack of Windwolves had also chased towards him, and quite soon, they drew close.

The two Windwolf leaders were the first to draw near. Howling, they stared at Linley, a look of suspicion in their ice cold eyes. Why did Linley stop fleeing? These highly intelligent magical beasts were now suspecting that Linley had prepared some trap.

“Growl...” One of the two Windwolf leaders let out a low growl. Immediately, as though responding to an order, a Windwolf of the fourth rank directly leapt towards Linley.

Linley suddenly leapt up and pointed at the distant group of Windwolves. In a low voice, Linley said, “Supergravity Field!”

Earth-style magic – Supergravity Field!

This was an extremely terrifying earth-style spell. Through controlling and utilizing a large amount of earth elemental essence, this spell allowed the user to manipulate the strength of the gravity in a localized area, causing opponents to suffer dramatically from the increased gravity. Only a magus of the fifth rank was capable of utilizing the Supergravity Field spell.

And the more powerful an earth-style magus was, the more powerful the effect his Supergravity Field would have.

“Rumble...”

The very air trembled. With Linley at the epicenter, a circular area with a diameter of 100 meters suddenly began to glow with earth elemental essence. All of the Windwolves within this diameter suddenly felt an astonishingly powerful pull of gravity. That Windwolf which was charging Linley was also affected by it, causing him to collapse to the ground in mid-leap. All the other Windwolves felt rather shocked as well. The two Windwolf leaders let out furious howls, and ignoring everything else, directly charged towards Linley. But clearly, these two Windwolves now possessed less than half of their original strength.

"Your speed has been halved, but mine is unimpaired." Earth elemental essence was glowing and swirling around Linley as well, seemingly paired perfectly with the earth elemental essence glowing over the ground.

The earth elemental essences used by the Supergravity Field utilized certain unique vibrations. Each individual earth-style magus would utilize it in a slightly different manner, and would have different frequencies of vibrations. If one could totally control the oscillations of the earth elemental essences, one could nullify the influence of the Supergravity Field.

With the opponent's speed halved, his own speed, comparatively, was now much higher. Linley agilely dodged his enemy's attacks, while quickly beginning to mumble the words to another spell.

"Rumble! Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!"

Dozens of earthen spears erupted from the ground beneath the feet of the Windwolves. Those fiercely sharp edges directly penetrated into the chests of seven of the Windwolves, causing them to bleed profusely. Several of the other Windwolves were also seriously wounded by the earthen spears.

"Hooooooowl!"

The two Windwolf leaders were growing frantic.

Within the area of effect of the Supergravity Field, they had less than half of their original speed. They simply had no way of stopping the agile, nimble Linley. If they fought him head on, they could kill Linley, but they simply couldn't get near him! Based on Linley's ability as a magus of the fifth rank, dealing with them wasn't too difficult.

"Hooooooowl!" A low howl.

Without any hesitation, the two Windwolf leaders turned tail and ran. The ten or so surviving Windwolves also fled with them. Covered by darkness, in the blink of an eye, the Windwolves disappeared from Linley's field of vision. Seeing this, Linley quickly ran over and caught up to three heavily injured Windwolves that hadn't managed to flee in time.

"Crash! Crash! Crash!"

Linley landed three successive kicks on the skulls of the heavily wounded Windwolves. The sound of splintering skulls could be heard, and the three Windwolves immediately collapsed. Including the seven Windwolves that had been

stabbed in the chest by the earthen spears, a total of ten Windwolves had been slain. But because Linley had just exerted himself too vigorously, the wound across his chest had split open once again, and fresh blood began to flow out again.

Chapter 13 - Danger (part 1)

“Whew. They finally left.” Linley finally let out a deep breath.

Linley knew very well that he only had the prowess of a warrior of the fourth rank. Engaging in close quarters combat with Windwolves of the fifth rank was tantamount to suicide. Only by using magic could he hope to survive. But if it weren’t for the fact that he had sufficient speed, how would he have the chance to cast any magic spells. Fortunately, he was quite fast, and so he managed to get this favorable result.

“Even if a magus of the sixth rank was present, he wouldn’t necessarily have done better than me. A magus of the sixth rank, in terms of speed, wouldn’t have been able to shake off the pursuit of those Windwolves. When surrounded and attacked by a pack of Windwolves, he might not even have the chance to cast any spells.” Linley felt all the more certain that his decision to not let up on his physical training was a very wise decision.

Linley glanced at the Coiling Dragon Ring on his left hand. Ever since he had grown up, he had begun wearing the ring on his fingers.

“And it’s a good thing that I have this Coiling Dragon Ring! Otherwise, how would I have been able to utilize so many spells of the fifth rank?”

For the average magus of the fifth rank, after utilizing two spells of the fifth rank, they would most likely be out of mageforce. But Linley was different. He had just used six spells of the fifth rank; three casts of ‘Shattered Rocks’, one cast of ‘Supergravity Field’, one cast of ‘Earthguard’, and one cast of ‘Earth Spear Array’.

The reason for this? The Coiling Dragon Ring.

In years past, Doehring Cowart had come across this ring by accident. One time, when Doehring Cowart cast a spell, he found out, to his astonishment, that a spell which was cast through the Coiling Dragon Ring would only require a sixth as much mageforce and spiritual energy to achieve the same effect.

Clearly, through the Coiling Dragon Ring, one could more clearly sense and manipulate elemental essence. Additionally, it placed a much lower demand on spiritual energy and mageforce.

A sixth. What did that represent?

A Saint-level magus could normally just utilize the terrifying 'Annihilating Tempest' spell a single time. But with the aid of the Coiling Dragon Ring, he could use the spell six times! Such a terrifyingly powerful treasure caused Doehring Cowart to be uncontrollably excited. He considered this discovery to be the blessing of the earth mother, which is why he named the ring the 'Worldring'.

The divine treasure, 'Worldring'.

This was the name which Doehring Cowart had bequeathed upon it. Based on what Doehring Cowart had said, although the Yulan continent had some exceedingly powerful treasures which could make it much easier for a magus to cast spells, there were virtually none which were had the same degree of effect as the 'Worldring'.

But after obtaining this Coiling Dragon Ring, when training with it, Linley discovered something.

"Not just earth-style magic! Wind-style magic, and even my minuscule amount of fire-style magic, when channeled through the Coiling Dragon Ring, only requires a sixth as much spiritual essence and mageforce." Looking at the ring, Linley felt happier and happier.

Doehring Cowart also chose this moment to appear besides Linley.

"Don't look at it. In my era, after obtaining this Coiling Dragon Ring, I never dared to inform anyone about it. If anyone found out about it, most likely a large number of Saint-level combatants would come to try and take it from me. But I must say, even I did not imagine that it could also assist fire-style and wind-style magic users." Doehring Cowart sighed.

Linley nodded. "In the future, I will never dare to reveal this secret either." Linley knew very well how precious this ring was. If its secret was leaked out, most likely he would be dismembered by all the Saint-level combatants of the Yulan continent.

"Boss, you done?" The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, chose to speak at this moment. He was standing atop a grassy place not far away. Just then, Bebe had not joined the battle, just watched from afar.

Linley smiled.

"Oof, that hurts." Seeing the wound on his chest and how his clothes had been torn and stained by blood, Linley began to carefully dress his wound while also using elemental essence to close the wound.

Bebe was staring at Linley's wound as well, seemingly quite concerned.

"Boss, next time something like this happens, I'm gonna take action." Bebe suddenly said to Linley mentally.

"No need, not unless you believe I'm in a situation where I am powerless to resist and am definitely going to die. Only then can you act. Otherwise...what's the point of me doing training here?" Linley's voice was firm and unyielding. Bebe immediately no longer dared to speak. Bebe had long ago wanted to engage in a slaughter, but Linley never agreed.

Right now, hiding in the grass thirty meters away from Linley, a black shadow lay in ambush.

"Just now, in that battle, from start to finish, he utilized six spells of the fifth rank. Although the spells only had the power of the fifth rank, given that he was able to cast six of them, he most likely is a magus of the sixth rank. His combat prowess should be that of a warrior of the fourth rank. Based on the fact that his movements were assisted by wind-style magic, he most likely also possesses affinity for wind magic. In summary: A dual-element magus of the sixth rank, and a warrior of the fourth rank."

The distant dark shadow was calculating.

"90% chance of killing him successfully. I can make my move." The dark shadow made his decision.

Linley had just finished with one large battle. Naturally, he would be a bit more relaxed. That dark shadow still remained unmoving. In the dark night, he was nothing more than just another shadow. Not even the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, had the slightest idea he was there, much less Linley.

The layer of glowing elemental essence on the ground had vanished.

The Supergravity Field had expired!

"Now!" The dark shadow, which had been lying in ambush this entire time, suddenly flew out silently, flying at astonishing speed towards Linley like an illusionary shadow.

Linley suddenly felt a sense of panic, and he immediately dodged at high speed while turning his head to look behind himself. He saw a dark shadow stabbing at him with a sharp knife, the knife emanating a cold light which made Linley's heart turn to ice. Those cold, callous, murderous eyes in the dark shadow also made Linley's heart tighten.

"How incredibly fast!" Linley hurriedly retreated, but clearly the shadow was even faster. The flashing black knife had almost reached his eyes.

"Clang!"

Linley wielded his straight chisel to block the opponent's knife, and the black knife of the opponent viciously collided with the straight chisel. With a cracking sound, the straight chisel was totally shattered, with some of the shards of the straight chisel cutting into Linley's face, leaving bloody lines over him.

"Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!"

Seven or eight blades of wind suddenly appeared next to Linley and chopped at the dark shadow. Based on Linley's current level of ability, he was totally capable of subvocally casting the wind blades spell. Those seven or eight wind blades all chopped at the dark shadow, but once they came into contact with the black light emanating from the shadow, they all disappeared.

"Darkness-style battle-qi!" Linley immediately made the deduction.

Although these seven or eight blades of wind had not managed to block the dark shadow, they had managed to distract him momentarily. Linley immediately turned around and shot forward like an arrow from a bow. The dark shadow had fast reflexes, however, and chased after Linley, vaulting forward towards Linley at an even higher speed.

In midair, facing Linley, the dark shadow pierced at Linley with his knife once again, still aiming directly for Linley's heart. At this moment, in the back of Linley's mind flashed the image of those five corpses he had seen just before entering the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. All five of them had been killed by stabs to the heart.

"Die."

The dark shadow was totally confident. His knife, covered with a black glow, had already reached Linley's chest. In midair, there was no place for Linley to go or to hide. The only option he had was to instacast the most protective defensive spell available to him; the shield of earth! A small shield of earth, only a third of the size of a normal one, suddenly appeared in front of Linley's chest.

“Hrmph!”

The dark shadow sneered. The knife in his hand pierced through the shield at an even greater speed. To someone on the dark shadow’s level, a shield of earth posed no barrier at all.

After having been shrunk in size, the shield of earth actually had quite respectable defensive abilities, but when faced with the attack from this knife, all it could do was slow it down and not stop it. Linley felt some pain in his chest as in just a few moments, the knife pierced all the way through his shield of earth.

“Raaaaawr!”

A terrifying, high-pitched scream could be heard as the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, suddenly appeared next to the dark shadow’s wrist. The Shadowmouse’s mouth was large enough to chomp down on a human hand, while his sharp teeth, were totally capable of chewing through anything. Bebe bit down hard on the dark shadow’s wrist. With an anguished cry, the dark shadow lost his hand at the wrist.

All that was left was half of a hand, still grasping the dagger that had pierced through the shield of earth and penetrated Linley’s chest.

Chapter 14 - Danger (part 2)

“Ah....ah!!!” His wrist had been totally bitten off. The pain caused the dark shadow to scream in misery.

With a flash, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, suddenly arrived right in front of the dark shadow. The dark shadow stared with terror and amazement at the pet-sized Shadowmouse. “What...what...what freak is this?” The dark shadow definitely couldn’t believe that this was a Shadowmouse. He had seen Shadowmice before, and none were this terrifying.

The dark shadow forced himself to ignore the pain from his severed wrist as he generated a dark layer of protective battle-qi while also moving to flee.

The dark shadow only seemed to see the little Shadowmouse flicker in front of him. And then, he felt sudden, excruciating pain, as the little Shadowmouse had lunged forward and bit him directly on the throat. Even his protective layer of dark battle-qi was chewed through.

“CRUNCH!”

That person's quavering scream suddenly cut off. Half his neck had been bitten off. His head was only attached to his body by a thin strip of flesh. The eyes of this dark shadow gradually lost all life, and his body slumped down to the ground.

At this time, Linley also landed on the ground. He immediately pulled out the dagger, blood already pouring from the wound in his chest, staining his clothes red. Seeing the wound in his chest, Linley felt his heart quiver. If his opponent's knife had went in just a few more centimeters, his heart would have been penetrated.

"So close. Just a bit further, and my life would've been gone."

After this narrow shave, Linley couldn't help but turn to look at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe. Bebe urgently said, "Boss, what's the situation?"

"Not too bad. I didn't lose my life." Linley smiled at Bebe. If it weren't for Bebe, he really would've died.

Hearing these words, Bebe's face was no longer as frantic as it was earlier. At the same time, he also began to grow cocky. The fur on his back stood up straight, and he began wagging his posterior at Linley. After wagging a few times, he delightedly said to Linley through their mental bond, "Boss, you are way too weak. You keep on saying that you want to train yourself, but look! You almost just got yourself assassinated by that guy." There was no way that the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was going to give up this opportunity to mock Linley.

Linley only chuckled.

"Bebe, thanks. You saved my life just then." Looking at the those two terrifying wounds on his chest, Linley couldn't help but sigh. "And this was just the first day!"

Doehring Cowart appeared as well, also sighing in surprise. "This assassin's subterfuge abilities were really terrifying. This time, the little Shadowmouse really saved the day. If it weren't for him, Linley, you would've been done for. As for me, this useless old fellow, all I have left is my spirit. There's no way for me to rescue you."

Linley understood that Doehring Cowart, despite being a Saint-level Grand Magus, only had his spirit left.

"Doehring Cowart, how could that assassin move so quickly? Even with the assistance of wind-style magic, I couldn't outpace him." Linley didn't really understand.

Doehring Cowart explained, "That assassin should've been a warrior of the sixth rank, but he specialized in the strange, secretive ways of darkness-element battle-qi. In addition, he should've received special training in subterfuge and concealing his aura. A warrior of the sixth rank who has received special training should have higher combat ability than the average warrior of the sixth rank. Darkness-element battle-qi is quite strange and secretive. Most likely, he specialized in a certain darkness-element technique that boosted his speed."

Linley nodded slightly.

Darkness-element magic or battle-qi was forbidden in the Holy Union. In the Four Great Empires and in the Dark Alliance, however, the darkness styles were not forbidden. Similarly, in the Dark Alliance, light-style magic and battle-qi training was forbidden.

"Boss, get over here quick!" The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, began jumping out and down next to the corpse of the assassin.

Linley glanced over questioningly. "Bebe, what is it?"

"This assassin had a pouch on his back." The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, said excitedly. Linley walked over to the assassin's corpse. The black clothes on the assassin's back had already been ripped apart. Clearly, this was the doing of the little Shadowmouse.

Beneath the torn back clothes, a backpack was tightly strapped to the assassin's back.

"Linley, I'll wager that those five we saw earlier was killed by him as well. Based on his ability, who knows how many he has killed? His pouch most likely has quite a few magicite cores." Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley couldn't help but feel excited. Based on this assassin's prowess, he perhaps was able to kill even your average warrior of the sixth rank. Most likely, he had quite a few possessions.

"Squeak squeak!" The little Shadowmouse grabbed the backpack with his teeth, and with a bound, leapt on top of Linley's shoulder.

Seeing this, Linley couldn't help but feel secretly surprised. "Bebe's speed really is incredibly fast now. Even though that assassin was very fast as well, he was only a bit faster than me. But Bebe's speed is fast enough that I don't even have the ability to react to him. No wonder that assassin was bitten to death by Bebe without even having the chance to dodge or block."

"Squeak! Squeak!" Holding the backpack by his teeth, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, shook it a few times. "Boss, hurry up and open it up to take a look!" He said rather urgently to Linley through their link.

Bebe was very curious as to what was inside the pouch.

Laughing, Linley accepted the pouch. This was a pitch-black backpack, also made from leather, but clearly of far higher quality than Linley's own leather backpack. Most likely, it was made from the skin of some high-rank magical beast. He opened the backpack.

Seeing the items inside, Linley's eyes lit up. Within the backpack, there was a set of clothes, some dried rations, and a sack of gold coins. Inside the backpack, the largest space was reserved for a large sack of items. Opening up the sack, Linley couldn't help but suck in a cold breath of surprise.

"How many people and how many magical beasts has this assassin killed?" Linley was somewhat stunned. The contents of this large sack were all sparkling, rainbow-colored magicite cores, and even a few large magicite gems mixed in.

"So many magicite cores! There's got to be at least a few dozen cores here." Linley felt excited.

Linley immediately began to count the number of cores, and also differentiate them by value. Differentiating the amount of magical energy contained within a magicite core was quite easy for a magus. In a short while, Linley had completed his accounting of the various cores within the pouch.

"A total of 102 magicite cores and 7 magicite gems. For the magicite cores, there are five magicite cores of the sixth rank, 26 magicite cores of the fifth rank, and 71 magicite cores of the fourth rank. No cores of the third rank. For the magicite gems, six are medium-grade magicite gems, while one is high-grade."

Linley could feel his heart beat frantically. What Linley didn't realize yet was that this assassin had also acquired magicite cores of the third rank; he just didn't bother keeping any of them.

As for the magicite gems?

Magicite gems were usually affixed to a magestaff to help the magus rapidly recover his mageforce. All of them had been acquired after the assassin had killed a magus and torn the magicite gem from the magestaff.

"The 102 magicite cores are probably worth around 13,000-14,000 gold coins, while the seven magicite gems are worth around 1600 gold coins at least. All together, the value of these things is about 15,000 gold coins." After reaching this calculation, Linley couldn't help but feel surprised and overjoyed. In a single backpack from an assassin, he had suddenly gained so much wealth.

As for his clan?

Previously, in order to acquire the funds to send his little brother Wharton off to the O'Brien Academy, the clan had virtually exhausted all of its savings. Even if you asked the Baruch clan to produce just ten thousand gold coins, it would be extremely difficult.

"This is just my first day in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and I've already acquired so much. How much will I have gained after two months?" Linley's heart was filled with anticipation.

But Linley also knew quite well that there was no way he would constantly meet with such a 'fat sheep' for slaughtering. In addition, most 'fat sheep' were quite powerful as well. This time, Linley had nearly died. Thinking back to what had just happened, Linley couldn't help but touch the wounds on his chest as well as the wounds on his face caused by the shattered straight chisel.

Linley suddenly turned to stare at the ten dead Windwolves.

"Ten or so magicite cores of the fourth rank, combined, are worth several hundred gold coins as well. Can't let'm go to waste." Holding the assassin's knife in his hand, Linley went over to the Windwolf corpses and began digging out the magicite cores, one after another. Upon using the knife, Linley came to the realization that it was much sharper than the one he had been using.

Chapter 15 – Cruelty

Within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, next to a spring, Linley dressed his wounds as he also began absorbing earth elemental essence to heal his wound. The ever-benevolent Mother Earth is always kind and selfless. Standing on the earth, Linley felt his wounds slowly heal, filling his heart with peace.

By now, Linley had already exchanged backpacks. His own backpack, in terms of both quality of leather and quality of workmanship, was far inferior to the assassin's. In addition, the assassin's backpack had an interior which was meticulously laid out. Once the lock was tightened, all of the items inside the backpack would be securely

fastened, and the backpack itself would not impede movement in the slightest. And that assassin's black dagger was also extremely sharp, and Linley found that it was quite easy to wield.

"Whoosh!"

With a flicker, Linley's body moved, and he suddenly disappeared into the mountain forests. Linley didn't even bother to pay any attention to magical beasts of the first or second ranks. The most commonly seen beasts were of the third and fourth ranks. But if he ran into a magical beast of the fifth rank, Linley had confidence in at least giving them a good tussle.

As he drew deeper and deeper into the mountain ranges, Linley encountered one bloody, cruel battle after another. He experienced many ambushes and assassination attempts. After all of these battles, the wounds and scars on Linley's body grew more and more plentiful as well, while Linley's spirit grew more and more tenacious.

These life-and-death battles caused Linley's mind to become tougher, and his actions to become more merciless.

In the blink of an eye, a month had passed since Linley had entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

.....

A month later, on top of a large tree located next to a mountain spring.

There was a long scar on the left side of his face. Linley's back was arched, and he was hidden on top of the tree like a panther lying in ambush.

Right now, Linley was hidden in the middle of many leaves, staring straight down at the ground. Just a few dozen feet away from the tree which Linley was hiding in was a small creek, and drinking water from the creek was a powerfully built Bloodthirsty Warpig. A single, blood-colored horn protruded out from above the Warpig's nose, and muscles bulged throughout its body, like the gnarled roots of a tree.

Bloodthirsty Warpig, a magical beast of the fifth rank, fire-element!

"This Bloodthirsty Warpig has a tough, thick skin. Its defensive abilities are exceedingly strong. Most likely, the earthen spear techniques wouldn't be able to penetrate its skin."

Linley had a sudden insight, and began to formulate a plan. Immediately, his lips began to move silently as he soundlessly began to mouth the words to a spell.

Slowly, the wind elemental essences around Linley began to swirl about him, forming into a bluish, translucent javelin in front of him. The translucent javelin's tip had gusts of wind flowing about it.

Wind-style magic of the fifth rank – Windhowl!

“Swish!”

A piercing sound could be heard as the Windhowl javelin shot downwards with terrifying speed. At the same time, Linley jumped down from the tree's crown, leaping down with as much speed as the javelin.

Upon hearing the noise, the Bloodthirsty Warpig stopped drinking water and stared up, but the Windhowl javelin was simply too fast. In the blink of an eye, it traversed the distance and was only a few meters away from the Warpig. The javelin's speed really was frighteningly fast, and its tip was covered with gusts of wind.

“Grrrr!” The Bloodthirsty Warpig let out an angry howl, and it used the horn above its snout to strike viciously at the Windhowl javelin.

“Crash!”

The javelin formed from the Windhowl spell crashed directly onto the horn of the Bloodthirsty Warpig. The Windhowl javelin immediately dissipated, but at the same time, after taking a hit from a spell of the fifth rank, the Warpig couldn't help but half-kneel from the force of the blow, with a bloody scar appearing on its forehead as well.

“Woosh!”

Before the Warpig had a chance to react, right behind the Windhowl javelin was Linley, who with all his might, struck down at the center of the head of the Warpig with his newly acquired black dagger. The dagger penetrated directly into the skull of the Warpig, and as it did, Linley immediately dodged.

“Roar!”

Having been stabbed in a vital spot, the Bloodthirsty Warpig roared furiously. Flames began to arise on its body, and it also began charging forward with no regard for anything. But after rushing a few dozen meters, it collapsed. Its four legs quivered a few times before coming to a stop, and all of the fire on its body began to die as well.

"Amongst the magical beasts of the fifth rank, much like the Vampiric Iron Bull, the Bloodthirsty Warpig is considered a beast of rather low intelligence." Linley walked to the corpse of the Warpig, pulled out his dagger, and removed the magicite core from within the Warpig's corpse.

Thinking back to his recent life in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, Linley couldn't help but admit to himself that although he was still a magus of the fifth rank and a fighter of the fourth rank, his actual combat ability had increased tremendously compared to when he had first entered the mountains.

After multiple life-and-death struggles, his body was covered with scars which symbolized painful lessons learned over this month.

Especially...

On his chest, there was an extremely horrifying wound. That time, he really was at death's door. In the end, it was the little Shadowmouse who once again saved the day.

This wound wasn't given to him by a magical beast. It was given to him by an extremely adorable young lady.

"Back then, I really trusted her. I really believed that her friends had all been killed, and that the only one left was her, injured and alone." Thinking back to the events of two weeks prior, Linley once again felt a stab of terror. That girl had seemed so kind, so pure.

When Linley discovered her, three other men and another girl had all died. Only she was left, filled with terror.

Linley couldn't help but go comfort her, help her, take care of her. That girl had seemingly suffered a huge mental blow. Every night, she insisted that Linley hold her, as only in Linley's arms did she feel safe enough to go to sleep. Every night, upon seeing the peaceful look on her face as she went to sleep, Linley felt joy in his heart. Three days passed in such a fashion. On the fourth night, she once again was sleeping quietly in Linley's bosom.

But suddenly, this adorable girl pulled out a dagger and stabbed directly at Linley's chest, with Linley caught totally offguard.

And then, the enraged Bebe had suddenly, bizarrely, doubled in size. His enormous jaws bit off the girl's head with a single bite, immediately killing her. And then, Bebe returned to his normal size.

But Linley couldn't staunch the flow of blood from the deep wound in his chest. In the end, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was forced to use some special darkness-type magic techniques to close the wound.

"Back then, I should've listened to Grandpa Doehring's advice. I lacked experience." Linley thought to himself and sighed. Originally, Doehring Cowart had warned him several times about the girl. In the end, seeing that Linley was stubbornly set on assisting the 'helpless' little girl, there was nothing that Doehring Cowart could do. But he still tried to insist that even if Linley was going to help her, that he absolutely must not allow her to get near him.

But at the time, the girl was extremely 'terrified', and wasn't able to fall asleep without Linley holding her. In the end, in order to comfort her, Linley held her in her arms, and they both went to sleep.

"I really didn't expect that her acting abilities would be so good. I treated her so well, but she could be so merciless to me." Linley sighed again in his heart. When that girl had stabbed him in the chest, he had seen the vicious look in her eyes, and his heart had grown cold.

What had caused this girl to be so heartless and merciless?

Could it be that despite taking care of her for three full days, she hadn't been moved in the slightest?

"Fortunately, thanks to Grandpa Doehring warning me over and over again, I didn't reveal Bebe's true capabilities to her." Linley couldn't help but admit that his life had been preserved thanks to Doehring Cowart and Bebe.

"Linley, what are you thinking about? Are you thinking about that girl again?" Doehring Cowart appeared by Linley's side.

Seeing the look on Linley's face, Doehring Cowart was able to guess what he was pondering. That stab from the girl had injured Linley deeply, not just in the flesh, but also in his heart. From that day onwards, Linley no longer would easily trust others.

From the very beginning, Doehring Cowart had sensed that there were some problems with the girl. How could someone with the courage to enter the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts be so totally discombobulated by the sight of death?

Unfortunately, Linley was still totally convinced by the girl's performance, and really felt that the girl was very 'pitiable'.

"Linley, that girl's performing abilities was nothing. Back in my time, in the Pouant Empire, I saw so many plots from enemy countries, plots which involved decades of subterfuge and lies which were totally undetectable. Their acting abilities are beyond your comprehension." Doehring Cowart smiled faintly as he spoke. "Remember, don't easily lower your guard when dealing with a stranger."

Linley nodded slightly.

"Squeak, squeak!" The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, began to call out from next to Linley.

Linley looked up.

Right now, the little Shadowmouse was leaping up and down atop the Warpig's corpse.

"Boss, when are we gonna go to the central areas of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?" Bebe mentally spoke to Linley in a somewhat unhappy tone. "In this current area, the strongest creatures that we can meet are magical beasts of the sixth rank. They aren't much of a challenge. I want to challenge magical beasts of the seventh rank, boss! I want to challenge magical beasts of the seventh rank!"

Linley glanced at the little Shadowmouse. "That's enough. Don't get too cocky. You are bragging that magical beasts of the sixth rank are too easy? Do you remember that Bluewind Hawk from the other day? Was there anything you could do to him?"

"That's not my fault!" Bebe rubbed his head with his tiny paws as he said unhappily, "Boss, you saw yourself. That Bluewind Hawk stayed in the skies and refused to come down. He just kept on throwing magical wind knives at us, as though they didn't cost him any mageforce at all. I couldn't just let him attack me without end, could I?"

Linley laughed.

Over the course of the past month, Linley had become very familiar with the little Shadowmouse's abilities. In terms of speed, Bebe had reached a terrifying level indeed. But because he was physically small and only had his claws and teeth as offensive weapons, although Bebe was capable of dealing with magical beasts of the sixth rank, he most likely would find it quite hard to deal with a magical beast of the seventh rank.

Just at this moment, Linley suddenly frowned. He cautiously turned his head and saw a blurred human outline appear in the wilderness.

Chapter 16 - Cruelty (part 2)

“Linley, it’s actually you! This is great!” A happy voice rang out, and a skinny young man began jogging towards them at high speed. This youth was the skinny warrior whom Linley had met on his way towards the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Of the other two people he had met, his classmate Delsarte and the big, burly Kava had both died.

Back then, when facing the wind-style magus-archer, Linley had utilized the earth-style spell ‘Earthen Spear Array’. The skinny warrior of the fifth rank, Matt, had seized the opportunity to immediately flee. But Linley didn’t really care that he had ran away. After all, him and Matt didn’t have any special relationship.

Honestly speaking, of the three people he had encountered, the only one Linley genuinely felt friendly towards was his own classmate, Delsarte. That big fellow, Kava, had also made a good impression on Linley. Linley didn’t have any special feelings for Matt.

“Oh, it’s Matt. I didn’t expect that the two of us would meet again in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts after a month had passed.” Linley was still quite calm.

Matt appeared very excited. “This is wonderful. This month, on numerous occasions, I was almost overcome by the magical beasts here. Fortunately, my luck was not too bad. Whoah – is that a Bloodthirsty Warpig? Linley, you were able to kill a Bloodthirsty Warpig? You really are formidable!”

Linley smiled.

“I’m getting a bit hungry. I’ve heard that the flesh of both the Bloodthirsty Warpig as well as the Vampiric Iron Bull are both extremely flavorful, and that it has a wonderfully chewy texture as well. I haven’t had lunch yet. You wouldn’t mind sharing some Warpig flesh with me, would you?” Matt joked.

The Bloodthirsty Warpig was huge in size, with its corpse weighing at least several hundred kilograms. Even ten people wouldn’t be able to finish it all.

“Of course not.” Linley withdrew his knife and began slicing off parts of the Warpig.

“Linley, no need to trouble yourself. This Bloodthirsty Warpig corpse is part of your spoils of war. How can I trouble you to butcher it as well? Let me do it. My roasting abilities are quite formidable.” Matt immediately headed towards the Warpig corpse and withdrew a knife from his side.

Playing with the knife, Matt began to expertly butcher the Warpig, although he only cut off the four legs, tongue, and tail. He then began to wash these pieces in the nearby spring.

“Boss, he seems to be quite skilled. He doesn’t seem to be any weaker than you in this respect.” The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, leapt onto Linley’s shoulders and mentally said to Linley.

Glancing at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, on his shoulders, Linley couldn’t help but sigh with gratitude. When others saw this little tiny black mouse, perhaps they would just think that it was an ordinary little Shadowmouse, of little threat. But in reality...

Linley could still recall how the terrifying sight of how the enraged Bebe so easily slaughtered that dark assassin, as well as that ‘kind’ young girl.

“Can’t judge a person by his appearance. Same goes for magical beasts.” Linley sighed to himself.

Matt quite quickly began to set up his roasting apparatus, and also withdrew some rough cooking salts and seasonings from his pouch. “Linley, these Warpig legs will definitely be very tasty. Its tongue, as well, is both soft and fragrant. The flavor of a Warpig tail is quite good as well.”

As he spoke, Matt had chopped both the tail and the tongue into multiple pieces. Linley watched as Matt used flints to light a fire, not stepping in to help despite being in possession of fire-style mageforce. He watched Matt quickly and constantly roast each piece.

After a period of time.

“It’s about time. Have a taste.” Matt quite enthusiastically handed a large chunk of Warpig leg meat to Linley.

But in turn, Linley flipped the Warpig meat around and offered it to Bebe. Bebe immediately accepted it happily, and began to chomp away in earnest. This Warpig leg was perhaps three or four times larger than Bebe, but in a short period of time, Bebe totally devoured all of the meat.

This sight caused Matt to gape in astonishment.

“He really is a magical beast. Even a little black Shadowmouse can eat so much.” Matt sighed while offering a piece of roasted Warpig tongue to Linley. “Linley, have a taste of my artisanship.”

Linley smiled as he declined. "No need. I'm not used to eating tongues. Some of that leg meat will do just fine." Linley took one of the other legs and began to eat without any reservations. Next to him, Matt laughed. "Then I won't force you. If you won't eat it, I will. Haha."

As though enjoying himself very much, Matt began to eat the roasted Warpig tongue and tail.

By the time that Linley had finished eating the Warpig leg, Matt hadn't taken a single bite of it yet.

"You are done already? Haha, fine then. I'm half-full now anyhow. I'll save this Warpig leg for when I am hungry." Matt withdrew an oilcloth from his backpack and placed the Warpig leg inside it, then replaced the cloth within his backpack.

Linley glanced at Matt.

It seemed as though Matt wanted to travel alongside him.

"Matt, here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, I'm fine training by myself. Let's part ways here." Linley said directly.

Matt immediately frowned. "Linley, this place is extremely dangerous. It'd be much safer if we travelled together. Honestly speaking, during this past month, I've been frightened during every combat encounter. I'm not even able to sleep well."

"Then do as you wish."

Linley didn't mince words. He immediately headed deeper into the mountains, while Matt, smiling, followed him. But when his gaze fell upon the backpack Linley was carrying, a slightly sinister light shone in his eyes.

"This backpack is different from the one Linley was carrying a month ago. And it seems much fuller as well." Matt sneered to himself, but he still smiled in a very friendly manner. Matt was not the same as Linley. Before entering these mountains, he had trained himself in other places for many times.

Matt sped up his pace. Smiling, he said, "Linley, you really are a wonderful fellow. Travelling with you, I feel much safer. After all, two people together are much stronger than two people separate. At night, the two of us can take turns sleeping. There's no need for us to both be on full alert at night."

Linley was silent. His gaze was always focused on his surroundings, carefully keeping an eye out for the magical beasts in these mountains.

....

They slowly made their way north, as Linley no longer dared to go further east. If they travelled further east, they would be entering the dangerous parts of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Currently, in this area, Linley would only encounter magical beasts of the fifth or sixth rank.

This entire time, Matt followed by his side, seemingly quite happy.

Two days later.

It was late at night, and the world was dark. Linley and Matt continued going forward in a single file line.

“Linley, do you think it’s about time for us to go back yet? Honestly speaking, we’ve spent about enough time here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.” Matt said in a soft voice as he followed Linley’s trail.

Linley just calmly shook his head, not making a sound.

Matt felt a hint of anger. “Every night, this Linley fellow is extremely careful. He isn’t giving me any opportunities at all.” Matt didn’t have any confidence in his ability to kill Linley. After all, being able to survive here for so long was a proof of Linley’s abilities.

“Hrm?” Linley seemed to have noticed something special. He turned around and stared at a copse of trees not too far away. Within that copse of trees, there was a hidden, indistinct shadow lying in wait.

Matt, next to Linley, saw him turn his head, presenting his back to Matt. A look of greed appeared in Matt’s eyes, as well as a look of excitement. In a practiced manner, Matt suddenly drew his dagger and without any hesitation at all, stabbed towards Linley’s back....

Linley suddenly turned and grabbed Matt by the wrist of his right hand, which was holding the dagger. At the same time, he stared coldly at Matt. His voice even colder, he asked, “What do you think you are doing?”

“You!” Matt was shocked. He couldn’t believe that his attempted sneak attack had apparently been noticed and blocked.

Matt immediately smiled at Linley instead. “What do I think I’m doing? O mighty genius magus, let me tell you...I am going to kill you.” Matt was totally confident in

himself. With the two of them in such close proximity, how could he, a warrior of the fifth rank, be unable to kill a magus of the fifth rank?

Matt suddenly exerted some strength with his right arm, and he began to blaze with battle-qi, forcibly shaking off Linley's grip.

"Die!" Matt stared at Linley as he stabbed again at Linley with his dagger.

"Rawr!!!!"

A terrifying sound! "What?!" Matt heard the noise, and he couldn't help but shudder. And then, Matt saw a very small black shadow appear in front of him.

"What...what is this?" Matt could tell that this black shadow was actually the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, which spent every day on Linley's shoulders. The little Shadowmouse opened his mouth wide, revealing a mouth filled with a horrifying number of sharp teeth, and directly chomped down towards Matt's face.

"Nooo-!"

Matt immediately tried to retreat at high speed, while also jerking his head away.

"Crunch!"

The little Shadowmouse's speed was far faster than Matt had imagined. How could Matt dodge? The little Shadowmouse reached out with his right paw, waving his sharp, knife-like talons at Matt's head. With but a single swipe, half of Matt's neck was removed from his body, and blood spurted out wildly.

"Urk...gurgle..." Clasping a hand to what remained of his neck, Matt's eyes were as wide as an ox. His disbelieving, terrified eyes were fixed upon the little Shadowmouse, and in his heart, he was utterly shocked. "Shadowmouse? Is this a Shadowmouse?"

As he fell into death and as his consciousness dissipated, Matt was still filled with terror and disbelief. He had prepared so long to make this move, but he hadn't figured the little Shadowmouse into his plans.

A dark-colored Shadowmouse was the weakest level of Shadowmouse.

But at the moment of his death, Matt finally realized that the adorable little Shadowmouse was actually a terrifying monster.

"Thud!"

Matt's hands fell lifelessly from his throat to his sides, and then he himself collapsed as well. His fresh blood stained his clothes and stained the ground.

Chapter 17 - Bebe's Prowess (part 1)

Standing in front of Matt's corpse, Linley couldn't help but heave a sigh. At the same time, he couldn't help but rub the scar on his chest.

The scar here was one which had almost taken his life.

"Compared to Nina [Ni'na], you are far too inferior." Linley shook his head and sighed. This Matt actually didn't have much of a friendship with him, and they were nothing more than temporary travel companions who met on the road. There was no way Linley would place too much trust in him.

What's more...

After having experienced Nina, how could Linley so casually present his back to others?

"Squeak squeak!" The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, came over carrying the backpack which was on Matt's back. He urgently said to Linley through their link, "Boss, hurry up and take a look and see how many magicite cores there are here. In this month, all of the other assassins combined didn't have as much as many magicite cores as that first assassin."

Doehring Cowart appeared by Linley's side as well.

"Linley, it seems like this little Shadowmouse that you've raised really enjoys counting magicite cores." Doehring Cowart chuckled.

"It does seem that way, just a bit." Linley accepted the backpack and opened it while joking with Bebe, "Bebe, this time when you killed that Matt fellow, I believe you used your claws, instead of your sharp teeth. Why didn't you use your fierce little teeth?"

Bebe sat up straight, let out a few arrogant squeaks, then said mentally, "Boss, I, Bebe, have incredible prowess. My sharp claws are no less fierce than my teeth. And that Matt fellow was too vile. Biting him would sully my teeth." After saying this, Bebe intentionally put on a display of 'spitting' out a mouthful of saliva.

The image of the little Shadowmouse spitting out a mouthful of saliva was simply too human-like. Upon seeing this, Linley immediately started laughing.

“That’s enough, oi, Bebe. Look, that Matt fellow had a lot of magicite cores in his backpack. There’s around thirty. Looks like he didn’t waste much time during this month. But the best core in these thirty is just a core of the fifth rank.”

Linley carefully began inspecting the cores.

During these thirty days, he had killed a number of magical beasts, as well as some people who wanted to kill him. All combined, he had nearly three hundred magicite cores, with a total valuation of perhaps around forty thousand gold coins!

“Forty thousand gold. If father knew...then...” Fantasizing about his father’s reaction when he gave him all that gold, Linley couldn’t help but feel overjoyed.

“It makes sense that you were able to acquire so much,” Doehring Cowart said. “Aside from those magical beasts you killed, of those three hundred magicite cores, virtually all of them came from other people’s backpacks.”

Linley nodded in agreement.

That very first assassin ended up donating him 15,000 gold coins worth of magicite cores. The others, all combined, had just a bit more than that first assassin.

“The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is extremely dangerous, so most people here have grouped up with others. But assassins rarely are willing to attack groups, because they generally specialize in killing someone instantly, which is why they prefer to fight one on one.”

Doehring Cowart suddenly began to laugh, his white whiskers floating about. “Linley, look at yourself. Yes, you might be tall and strong, but your face is still filled with a childish air. And that fuzz above your lips? All of those prove something...”

“You are just a kid!”

Doehring Cowart laughed uproariously. “Linley, in this huge mountain range, when those assassins find a kid here for his first training exercise, with such a childish face, how can they possibly not make their move against you? That’s why, in a single short month, you’ve run into so many assassins.”

“But those people travelling in groups might not encounter a single assassination attempt in a month. Of course, those five people we ran into that first day were

exceptions. First of all, they were too weak. And secondly, their killer was really strong. But in the end, that assassin died by Bebe's claws."

Linley laughed and nodded as well.

He was only fifteen years old this year, after all. Although he was 1.8 meters tall, anyone with a good eye could tell that he was just a kid.

"Most magi of the fifth and sixth rank would probably only acquire a few thousand gold coins worth of magicite cores in a month here. And all of those cores would be acquired through life-and-death struggles. After all, the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is incredibly dangerous." Doehring Cowart sighed emotionally.

Linley nodded in agreement. "It is dangerous. I've stayed in the outer regions this entire time, and at most I have run into magical beasts of the sixth rank. But I've been injured several times already. If it weren't for the Coiling Dragon ring, if it weren't for the fact that I'm both a dual-element magus of the fifth rank and a warrior of the fourth rank, and if it weren't for the fact that I have Bebe, I probably would've been done for, travelling on my own like this."

He turned to look at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, who was currently playing with a magicite core.

Calming himself, Linley collected the various cores, and then headed off once again, with Bebe in tow. He was going to continue his training in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. After all, based on his original plans, he was going to stay here for two months.

.....

Each day, Linley would fight against local magical beasts, and his abilities in merging his abilities as a magus with his abilities as a warrior grew better and better. He was also growing in practical experience in using earth-style and wind-style magic in battle. Gradually, Linley began suffering fewer and fewer wounds in battle. Naturally, as Linley gradually drew closer and closer to the core regions, magical beasts of the sixth rank began growing more and more plentiful, and Linley began to be more cautious as well.

On the 46th day of Linley's entry into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

"Swish!"

Ripples began to appear on the surface of the quiet little lake. A human figure suddenly emerged from within. It was Linley. Linley was using a piece of cloth to casually wash himself.

The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, stood on the shore, watching Linley bathe with an envious look in his eyes. After squeaking a few times, he began hopping up and down before diving directly into the lake. Seeing this, Linley couldn't help but chuckle, and then he continued to bathe himself.

"Haha, that's enough, Bebe, haha, that's enough!" Linley suddenly broke out into uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh, boss, you are afraid of being tickled?" The little Shadowmouse rose up into the surface of the water, guileless black eyes gleaming with a hint of mischief.

Chuckling, Linley walked onto the lakeshore. Removing a clean set of clothes from his backpack, he put the new clothes on. Changing clothes after a nice bath was a very luxuriant event. And then, Linley began to wash the just-removed clothes in the lake, then hung them onto a tree branch to dry off. With a leap, Linley landed onto another branch on the tree. Lying down, he watched Bebe mess around in the lake water.

He watched as Bebe joyfully leapt about in the water. Sometimes, Bebe would dive to the lake bottom, while at other times, Bebe would lie on his back on the lake surface.

"Rumble" "Rumble" "Rumble" "Rumble".

The ground suddenly began to shake ever so slightly. Based on the rumbling rhythm, Linley surmised that it should've been caused by something walking. Linley couldn't help but feel startled, and he looked directly towards the south, in the direction the rumbles were coming from. He saw a large, indistinct shadow appear from within the southern side of the lake, but after a short period of time, Linley was able to clearly see the figure.

It was at least two stories high, and covered with large, flame-red, shield-like scales, which also extended over and covered its four limbs like scaly armor. Its long tail was roughly half as long as its entire body, as nimble and as agile as a whip. Its two sinister, ruby-like eyes, each the size of a lantern, stared at the surface of the lake. Two plumes of white smoke continuously wafted out from its nostrils.

Linley was in total shock, and his body froze, even as his heart sped up.

"Velocidragon. Magical beast of the seventh rank – Velocidragon!"

Chapter 18 - Bebe's Prowess (part 2)

From his earlier years until now, the only magical beast which he was genuinely fascinated by was the Velocidragon, which he had seen that one time. That time, when the Velocidragon had demonstrated its terrifying power in the middle of Wushan township, it seemed to be an invincible force. With its terrifying power, it had wiped out one house after another...

Linley couldn't help but feel his heart quake.

When he was eight years old, Linley was just a child. But now, at age fifteen, he was a dual-element magus of the fifth rank.

"Boss! Boss! This one is mine!" The excited voice of the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, rang out in Linley's mind.

Linley turned to look at the surface of the lake, and saw that Bebe was so excited that all of the hairs on his body were sticking up as straight and stiff as needles. Even all of the muscles on his body were pulsing with energy. His fierce claws and head had grown in size as well. The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was previously around 20 centimeters in size, but now he suddenly elongated to a size of half a meter. This half-meter long size was the largest that Linley had ever seen Bebe grow to.

But despite this, the half-meter long Bebe was nothing more than a speck in comparison to the Velocidragon.

The Velocidragon's huge, lantern-like red gaze was fixed coldly on Bebe's form. It let out an angry snort that reverberated within the mountains. In reply, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also raised his head and let out a high-pitched shriek.

The sound of the low, growling snarl and the high-pitched shriek clashed.

Linley, who was watching all of this atop the tree next to the lake, suddenly felt as though the Velocidragon and the little Shadowmouse were two equally matched adversaries having a staredown.

"Raaaaawr!" A thundering roar!

An all-encompassing, blazing flame suddenly erupted from the Velocidragon's maw, covering the entire area of dozens of meters ahead of it in flame. The lake began to hiss as the surface water instantly began to boil. But Bebe didn't move at all, despite being bathed in flames; he just let the flame burn as it might.

From within the blazing flame, one could see that Bebe was not harmed in the slightest.

“Although Bebe is physically small, his defensive abilities are incredible. The power of this flame is approximately on par with a fire-style magus spell of the fifth rank, but it isn’t able to harm him at all.” Linley quietly watched. Despite having been in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for so long, Bebe had yet to meet a genuinely worthy opponent to do battle with.

Bathed in flames, Bebe was motionless. But then suddenly, he moved!

“Shkkkkkkkkreeee!”

With a terrifyingly high-pitched howl, Bebe transformed into a black shadow that sped towards the Velocidragon with vicious speed. The Velocidragon, which had continued to breathe out flames this entire time, suddenly widened its enormous, lantern-sized red eyes, while suddenly slapping forward with its long, whip-like draconic tail.

The incredible speed of the tail of the Velocidragon actually approached the speed of the little Shadowmouse’s movement.

“Whoosh!” Bebe’s movements were extremely bizarre, and he was actually able to dodge the hyper-fast attack of the Velocidragon’s tail, and immediately tried to bite at the Velocidragon’s throat. But the Velocidragon, in turn, immediately turned his head down and then tried to bite back at Bebe.

But clearly, Bebe was still a bit faster. As he gave the Velocidragon a vicious bite on the neck, a sharp ‘crack’ sound could be heard, as one of the thick scale on the Velocidragon’s neck was actually broken, and then swallowed whole by Bebe. Bebe was a creature that was capable of even devouring stones and bones. This Velocidragon scale proved to be edible by him as well.

But just at this time, the Velocidragon’s tail swept towards Bebe. “Thwack!” A high-pitched slapping sound could be heard, causing Linley to shiver. But Bebe had long since dodged and scurried away again.

“This Velocidragon has such a huge, thick neck. That bite Bebe gave it was nothing more than a light wound.” Linley breathlessly watched this battle between creatures of totally different sizes. “This Velocidragon’s tail moves in such an unpredictable manner, and it’s able to twist in turn at high speeds as well.”

The tail of a Velocidragon was not only fast, it was also agile and unpredictable.

“Shkreee!”

Bebe once more turned into a vicious black shadow. Erupting out from the water, Bebe once more dodged the draconic tail. But just as he dodged, the tail suddenly changed directions in a rapid, unpredictable manner. With a sudden twist, it struck Bebe a direct blow.

The vicious black shadow was sent flying into the faraway woods.

“Bebe!” Linley’s chest tightened.

But the Velocidragon only stared cautiously at the forest, as though keeping an eye out for a dangerous foe. Suddenly, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, came flying down at him from atop a particularly tall tree. The Velocidragon’s tail immediately twisted to strike at him, but this time, Bebe had learned from the previous painful lesson. With a twitch of his tail, he too suddenly changed directions in mid-air.

The little Shadowmouse was a blur. The draconic tail was also a blur!

The two blurred shadows chased each other about in mid-air. The little Shadowmouse would occasionally be sent flying by the Velocidragon, but every so often, he would also manage to land a vicious bite on the Velocidragon as well. They continued their fight, fighting all the way from the lakeshore to the forests. One mighty tree after another was knocked down by the Velocidragon’s tail as the Velocidragon and the Shadowmouse continued to fight without pause.

“From what I can see, it seems as though Bebe has a slight advantage.”

Linley nervously watched the fight. By this point in time, the huge Velocidragon had already lost seven or eight scales, and blood continuously flowed from seven or eight wounds, covering half of its body in blood. The Velocidragon’s enraged roars continued unabated.

Its tail whipping back and forth, any tree touched by the Velocidragon’s tail was snapped in half. One mighty tree after another toppled over, and an area with a diameter of approximately two hundred meters around the two combatants was totally cleared.

“But can Bebe keep on being hit like that, by the Velocidragon’s tail?”

Linley began to worry. The offensive power of the Velocidragon’s tail was very high. If it smashed into a stone, the stone would crumble; if it smashed into a tree, the tree would snap. This sort of offensive power made Linley’s heart grow cold. Linley

knew that if he was struck so much as a single time by that tail, his life would be gone.

“Whack!” Bebe was sent flying again, but in the blink of an eye, Bebe once more transformed into a furious black shadow as he charged into the fray again, screeching.

By now, the Velocidragon was covered with blood, with many damaged scales throughout its body. It looked to be in a bad way.

“Raaaawr!”

With an angry roar, the Velocidragon actually turned and began to leave. At high speed, it began to run towards the core areas of the mountains. In a short period of time, the Velocidragon disappeared from Linley’s vision. Bebe actually pursued it for a while as well before turning around and coming back to Linley.

Linley dropped down from his tree just as the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also ran over to him, his body shrinking back to its normal size.

“Bebe, are you okay?” Linley immediately asked him through their mental link.

Bebe jumped onto Linley’s shoulder and stood erect on his hind legs, as he looked arrogantly at Linley with his beady little black eyes. “Boss, what sort of magical beast do you take Bebe to be? How could I be afraid of a Velocidragon?” Pride and self-delight suffused Bebe’s adorable little face.

But suddenly, Bebe twitched his tail. Shaking himself, he said, “But that Velocidragon’s tail really is a rather nasty piece of work. My entire body hurts.”

Seeing this, Linley couldn’t help but chuckle. The Velocidragon’s tail wasn’t just a ‘rather nasty piece of work’. It was an extremely nasty piece of work. Linley was extremely glad that Bebe was able to withstand so many blows from it without sustaining any serious injuries.

“And this Velocidragon’s scales and meat really is thick. Even at my maximum size, I couldn’t bite through him.” Bebe sighed. “But I’m confident that if we kept on at it, I, Bebe, could’ve bled him to death. This Velocidragon was pretty sly though. It kept on moving about and never let me bite it on the same location twice.”

Linley secretly laughed.

There was a huge gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank, in terms of combat ability as well as other factors. Most likely, that Velocidragon’s intelligence

was not much less than a human being's. How could it possibly allow the little Shadowmouse to bite it in the same place twice?

No matter how thick the scales and flesh of the Velocidragon were, it couldn't withstand being bitten by Bebe multiple times. This Velocidragon most likely also realized that he wouldn't gain any benefit from continuing to fight, which was why it fled.

"Bebe, want to give a magical beast of the eighth rank a go?" Linley mentally teased.

Bebe's little eyes suddenly turned round as the moon. "Boss, don't mess with me like that. Dealing with that magical beast of the seventh rank was exhausting enough. I hear that magical beasts of the eighth rank are ten times as powerful as magical beasts of the seventh rank. Even if their movement speeds aren't as high as mine, most likely their attack speeds are higher."

Movement speed and combat attack speeds were two different speeds.

For example, the Velocidragon was perhaps much slower in terms of movement speed, but its tail was able to attack at an astonishing speed. Although some larger magical beasts appeared to be slow and clumsy, when they really started to fight, they were as fast as lightning!

After all, if they were mighty enough to be described as a magical beast of the eighth rank, they definitely would overmatch a magical beast of the seventh rank.

"Heh, looks like you know when to be humble after all." Linley chuckled while stroking Bebe's little head. "Alright, my clothes should be dry by now as well. Let's go take a rest on top of the tree, then eat some food. After a while, we'll continue onwards." As he spoke, Linley leapt up seven or eight meters onto a branch, and then he continued to lightly jump up, before leisurely coming to a rest at about twenty or thirty meters above the ground.

Chapter 19 - The Black Dagger (part 1)

The fifty first day in the mountain ranges.

"Do all of these killers think that I'm easy meat?" Linley glanced at the corpse of the female assassin, dressed in black. This woman only was a warrior of the fifth rank. Assisted by his magic, Linley was able to kill her by himself.

Doehring Cowart laughed. "Anyone who sees you will be able to tell that you are just a kid, a stupid kid who doesn't know how high the heaven is or how deep the earth is, a kid that dares wander these mountains alone. Why wouldn't they want to get an easy kill like you?"

Linley felt helpless.

He was still just fifteen. Despite having the physical size of a fully grown man, his face still betrayed his youth.

"This woman wounded me as she died. It's not a big deal that I have another scar, but she ruined my clothes as well. Now I only have one set of clothes remaining." Seeing the giant, gaping hole in his clothes, Linley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Linley had managed to acquire several sets of clothes from attempted assassins, but he had lost even more, here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

"Boss, the magicite cores in this person's bag are worth a couple thousand gold coins. Can a set of clothes be worth that much?" Bebe immediately argued.

Hearing these words, Linley laughed.

After having spent well over a month in these mountains, the scars on his body had grown more and more plentiful, but so too had the number of magicite cores in his backpack.

"Forget it. From now on, I'm going naked from the waist up. I'll save my last set of clothes for when I go back. No one will see me anyhow, here in these mountains." Linley determinedly tossed aside the ruined set of clothes, going bare-chested. His black dagger in hand, he marched onwards.

During this period of time, this black dagger had provided quite a bit of assistance to Linley.

After walking for a while, Linley began to casually murmur the words to a spell. After a short moment, a gust of wind began to swirl around the area, with Linley at the center. This was the Windscout spell once again. In an area with a diameter of 300 meters centered on Linley, nothing could escape Linley's attention.

Generally speaking, after walking for an extended period of time, Linley would be cautious and cast the Windscout spell. After walking for a while, Linley once again cast the Windscout spell.

"Ah, a group of people? Why are those people hiding on top of that tree?" Linley felt curious.

At this moment, about a hundred meters south of Linley, around ten or so people were hiding on top of an enormous old tree, with a girth so wide that seven people had to link hands to surround it. Curious, Linley couldn't help but quietly sneak closer.

Slowly, carefully, Linley crept into a patch of tall, thick grass, from whence he had a vantage point to peer at the ten people on the tree.

Those ten or so people were all wearing black clothes, and each of them had a black dagger sheathed at their waists.

"Black dagger?" Linley's gaze fixed upon one black dagger in particular.

In terms of both shape and coloration, it was identical to the one in Linley's hands. In addition, the ten or so people hiding on top of the tree gave Linley a similar, sinister feeling, very much like when Linley encountered that first assassin.

"The same black clothes, and the same black dagger, and..." Linley noticed that the backs of all of these men were bulging slightly.

Linley couldn't help but think back to that first assassin, who had his backpack tightly strapped to his back, beneath his clothes. It was only because Bebe had ripped the assassin's clothes open that they had discovered the backpack.

"They belong to the same organization." Even an idiot would come to this conclusion.

Linley's heartbeat involuntarily began to speed up. At this point in time, the people hiding on the tree were talking in a low tone.

"Why haven't #18 and #7 come back yet?" One of the black-garbed men said unhappily.

"Possibly dead." Another black-garbed man said coldly.

"Watch the time. We'll wait until night falls. If they aren't back by nightfall, then regardless of whether or not they are still alive, they will be considered to have failed." Another black-garbed man said coldly. Hearing his words, the other black-garbed men fell silent.

Hidden within the grass below, Linley could guess that the person who had just spoke was the leader of this group of black-garbed men. He felt secretly startled. "The person who tried to kill me originally was a warrior of the sixth rank, specializing in the darkness-style. Most likely, their leader is even stronger."

Linley immediately moved to retreat, but after just taking a few steps back...

The leader suddenly frowned and swerved, staring directly at Linley.

"Swish!"

A black blur shot out at Linley at high speed, shocking Linley. He realized, "I've been exposed!" He immediately utilized the wind-style Supersonic speed, and at the highest speed he could muster, fled deeper in the forest.

As far as Linley was concerned, the deeper one went into the mountains, the more dangerous it was. The opponent, upon seeing him run into the deep, dangerous mountains, might hesitate and refrain from chasing him. Linley had already made up his mind that after going a bit deeper in, he would change directions and leave.

Seeing the black backpack on Linley's back and the black dagger in his hands, the expression on the face of the leader of the group changed.

"#2, deal with him." The black-garbed leader ordered.

The higher the ranking number was, the stronger one was. The leader had already been able to accurately gauge Linley's strength from Linley's movements just then.

"Yes, lord." One of the black-garbed men immediately jumped down from the tree, and began to pursue Linley with astonishing speed. But because Linley had a significant head start, and was quite far from him to begin with, the two of them started off at a 70 meter distance.

But this black-garbed man really was very fast, seemingly a bit faster than even the first assassin.

"What astonishing speed." Linley agilely made his way into the mountains, sometimes crawling, sometimes jumping.

But from behind, the black-garbed man continued to coldly pursue, and the distance between the two continued to shrink. 60 meters. 50 meters. 40 meters. 30 meters. The longer Linley fled, the closer the pursuing assassin got.

10 meters. 9 meters. 8 meters. 7 meters!

Apparently terrified out of his wits, Linley headed directly for the deepest parts of the mountains.

“Wind-style magus?” The black-garbed man could tell that Linley was being aided by wind magic. “Even aided by wind-magic, he’s so slow. Looks like he’s a warrior of the fourth rank, at most the peak of the fourth rank.” Totally confident in his ability to kill Linley, the black-garbed man continued to draw closer.

On the surface, Linley seemed terrified, but in reality, he was quite calm and steady.

“We’ve run a few kilometers. Those ten assassins shouldn’t be able to see us from here.” A cold look suddenly flashed through the fleeing Linley’s eyes, and at the same time, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, which had been crouched over, ‘terrified’ on Linley’s shoulders, suddenly moved.

Whoosh!

The little Shadowmouse suddenly expanded in size before the assassin’s eyes, and in the blink of an eye reached him. The assassin could clearly see the little Shadowmouse’s fiercely sharp teeth...

Chapter 20- The Black Dagger (part 2)

The dark-robed man, just five or six meters away from Linley, had considered the dark Shadowmouse beneath notice, but upon seeing Bebe’s amazing speed, his cold face showed an expression of astonishment. “What is this speed?!” The dark-robed man hurriedly waved his dagger to block.

Clearly, this dark-robed man was somewhat stronger than the original assassin. At least when facing Bebe, he had the presence of mind and speed to wield his dagger.

“Swish!” Bebe swung his sharp claws fiercely.

“Clang!”

As Bebe’s claws slammed into the assassin’s dagger, the black dagger exploded into fragments, while Bebe’s claws, undamaged, immediately slashed violently against the dark-robed man’s head, directly shattering it. The man died on the spot.

“The gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank really is enormous.” Seeing this, Linley couldn’t help but sigh.

Bebe was a terrifying Shadowmouse who could even force the mighty Velocidragon, a magical beast of the seventh rank, to flee. Based on the power of Bebe's sharp claws and sharp fangs, killing a warrior of the sixth rank was as easy as eating rice.

"Rip!" Linley ran over to the corpse and tore the dark-garbed man's clothes apart, immediately grabbing the hidden backpack. Without doing anything else, he immediately turned and fled northwards. Gusts of winds arose around his legs, and he began moving with such grace and agility that he left almost no trail in his wake.

After a while, a second group of dark-garbed men finally arrived. Seeing the injury on #2's head, all of them frowned.

"A magical beast?" The images of many different magical beasts suddenly began to swim about in the mind of a dark-garbed man. "A Blue Shadowmouse of the sixth rank? Or a Violet Shadowmouse of the seventh rank? Or a Gold Stoneater Rat of the seventh rank?" This fierce but tiny claw mark must have been left by a rodent-type magical beast.

In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, some people believed that the most terrifying possibility was encountering a magical beast of the eighth or ninth ranks. Others believed that it was encountering a terrifying swarm of pack-type magical beasts. But in the heart of the dark-garbed man, the most terrifying possibility was encountering a Stoneater Rat swarm or a Shadowmouse swarm.

The Stoneater Rat had formidable defense, sharp teeth, and sharp claws.

The Shadowmouse had high speed, sharp teeth, and sharp claws.

If a swarm of thousands or tens of thousands of Shadowmice or Stoneater Rats attacked, even an army might be totally devoured, much less the ten of them.

"We're going back now!" Without hesitating in the slightest, the dark-garbed leader issued his order.

.....

Amidst towering mountains and ridges, Linley continued to run, winding his way atop of a mountain peak. After having run over a hundred kilometers at once, Linley believed that his pursuers would no longer be able to catch him.

"Boss, hurry up and open the backpack and see what's inside!" Bebe immediately urged.

Linley's heart was filled with anticipation as well. The more powerful an opponent was, the more magicite cores he should have in his backpack. That original assassin had left behind 15,000 gold coins worth of magicite cores and magicite gems. How much would this second assassin, who had been addressed as #2, have on him?

He opened the backpack.

"Two more sets of clean clothes." Linley glanced at the clothes in the backpack, then withdrew two bulging pouches from within the backpack. This "#2" had been in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for a month longer and was a bit stronger than the original assassin, so logically speaking...

Seeing how many magicite cores these pouches contained, Linley couldn't help but suck in a cold breath.

"So many? And most of them are magicite cores of the fifth rank. There's plenty of magicite cores of the sixth rank as well." After having seen so many magicite cores, Linley was now capable of recognizing the general rank of a magicite core at a glance. Linley immediately began to do a careful accounting of the cores.

"9 magicite cores of the sixth rank. 56 magicite cores of the fifth rank. 12 magicite cores of the fourth rank. Seven magicite gems. The total value, all together, would be roughly....20,000 gold coins. Adding this to the 50,000 gold coins worth that I already have, means that I should now hold at least 70,000 gold coins worth of magicite on me." After tabulating his total wealth, Linley couldn't help but take a deep breath.

70,000 gold coins!

If he placed this prodigious sum in front of his father, his father would most likely be stupefied.

Over the course of the 51 days he had spent in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, that assassin's organization alone had 'donated' 35,000 gold coins to him. The other attempted killers he had run into had 'donated' a further 30,000 gold coins, while he himself had killed enough magical beasts to earn 5000 gold coins worth of cores as well.

Doehring Cowart appeared from within the Coiling Dragon ring, laughing as he watched the look on Linley's face.

"I finally understood why so many people in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts like to try and kill other humans. After spending a full month working so hard, I only earned a few thousand gold coins, but when I killed someone else, I gained the

fruits of their two months of labor." Linley placed the two pouches into his own backpack, then tossed the extra backpack into the grass.

"Of these 70,000 gold coins worth of magicite, only 5000 came from me killing magical beasts. The rest all came from assassins and killers." Linley shook his head and sighed.

Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard while chuckling. "Looks like your youth actually helped you. If you looked just a bit more mature and experienced, there probably wouldn't have been so many killers trying their luck against you."

"Hehe." Linley couldn't help but laugh.

"Grandpa Doehring, just now, based on the words being exchanged by the people in that squad, it seems like they were on a training mission here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?" Linley was rather curious.

Doehring Cowart smiled faintly. "Linley, every single one of the major powers of the Yulan continent has to have its own base of martial power in order to maintain its strength. But martial power has to be trained and cultivated. Many of the larger powers will often send groups of its subordinates out to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts to train."

Linley nodded.

"Linley, this continent has many powerful organizations which you don't have a clue about. To be honest...even I don't know about them. In the past five thousand years, all of the powers which existed in the era of the Pouant Empire have most likely collapsed." Doehring Cowart said self-deprecatingly.

Linley didn't ask too much. At this moment, Linley felt enormous pressure. The Yulan continent was far more complicated than he had imagined.

After organizing his possessions, Linley put on a shirt before continuing on his way. Making his way agilely through the mountain forests, sometimes skipping over fallen rocks, sometimes crawling over fallen trees, Linley pressed onwards. But after Linley crossed a particularly large mountain....

He saw that this mountain was hundreds of kilometers long. There were many trees here. Standing at the peak of the mountain, Linley could tell that there was a distance of hundreds of kilometers from here to the next peak, if he wanted to directly fly across the gap.

"What a bizarre canyon."

Linley noticed that the canyon walls of these two mountain's cliffs drew closer and closer to each other at the edges. Linley immediately began to jog down from the mountain peak. The farther down he jogged, the closer the canyon walls appeared to be. After jogging for five or six kilometers, the gap between the two mountains was only a meter across. One could cross it with a single step.

"It's like this on this side. What is it like on the other side? The same?"

With one foot on each cliff, Linley peered across. Off in the distance, he seemed to see the two cliffs draw even closer, then become one.

"Bizarre. Bizarre."

Having been in these mountains for some time, Linley had seen many things, but he had never encountered such a weird canyon. Looking down through the canyon gap, Linley only saw a white fog, so blurry that he couldn't see anything at all.

"Immeasurably deep." Linley felt extremely curious, but was also rather wary what lay within the belly of this mountain gulch.

Making his way along the edges of the canyon, Linley continued peering down, as though hoping he could see what was hidden by white fog. Aside from how close the canyon walls were, there was another oddity to this ravine.

It seemed that the farther down the ravine was, the farther apart the canyon walls drew again.

For example, towards the top of the ravine, the distance between the canyon walls was perhaps a hundred meters or so, but from what Linley could tell, towards the bottom, the distance was perhaps a few thousand meters, or even tens of kilometers.

"Hrm? That's..."

Linley looked as though he had been struck by lightning. He carefully stared at a small patch of grass that was hidden beneath the fog beneath him. The small patch of grass growing alongside the cliffside was dark green, but the patch of grass emanated a faint blue aura.

"Blueheart Grass. It's Blueheart Grass!" Linley had seen a picture of Blueheart Grass at the Ernst Institute's library, and he remembered it clearly. His eyes shone. That ultra-rare, precious grass growing from the cliff was able to counteract the harmful effects which live dragon's blood would have on the body. Blueheart Grass!

Chapter 21 – The Foggy Gulch (part 1)

If one desired to train using the ‘Secret Dragonblood Manual’, one must rouse up the Dragonblood in one’s veins. But there were only two possible ways by which one could agitate the Dragonblood in one’s veins. The first was to reach a certain minimum level of Dragonblood density in one’s veins. The second was to drink fresh blood from a live dragon.

But drinking blood from a living dragon was very dangerous.

Dragon’s blood, even when applied topically, would cause terrible pain, to say nothing of drinking it. However, everything in the world had its equal opposite. Blueheart Grass, when paired with dragon’s blood, made for an extremely potent mixture. But Blueheart Grass was extremely rare. Linley had previously asked about the price.

A single patch of Blueheart Grass was worth tens of thousands of gold coins. What’s more, it was a rare item that often couldn’t be bought even if one had the money. Doehring Cowart had once said: “Live dragon’s blood is incredibly powerful. Usually, a single patch of Blueheart Grass is insufficient. If you are going to drink a large amount of live dragon’s blood, you will need even more Blueheart Grass.”

A single patch of Blueheart Grass was already that expensive. How could Linley afford it? Perhaps his entire fortune of 70,000, acquired over this month, would only be enough to buy a single patch.

“Blueheart Grass, Blueheart Grass! Heaven is being so kind to me.” Linley felt unspeakable joy.

Linley energetically leapt down directly, falling several dozen meters before landing against the cliff on the other side. And then, he immediately began to mumble the words to a spell. In a short time, Linley’s entire body was surrounded by flowing air elemental essences, and flows of air began to surround him as well.

Wind-style spell of the fifth rank – Floating Technique.

At his current level, Linley was only able to allow his body to float, rather than actually fly. Floating meant allowing himself to float up or down vertically. Taking a step forward, Linley stood in mid-air before slowly beginning to float down, gradually descending into the deep, foggy canyon. Bebe enviously stood on Linley’s shoulder as they descended. Although Bebe was rather powerful, he wasn’t capable of flight. He wasn’t a flying-type magical beast, thus he would only be able to fly upon becoming a Saint-level magical beast.

This canyon was filled with the white fog, which roiled about. The deeper Linley went, the greater the distance between the canyon walls became. Quite soon, Linley landed near the Blueheart Grass.

"Blueheart Grass is deep green in color, but emanates a faint blue light. Blueheart Grass is cool to the touch. When the blades of grass are torn apart, they will leak out a dark green fluid which is very cool when drunk." Linley remembered quite well this explanation in the Ernst Institute library about Blueheart Grass.

Staring at the Blueheart Grass growing out from the cliff, rustling gently in the wind, Linley took a deep breath, then carefully uprooted the Blueheart Grass.

"It really is cold." When he touched the Blueheart Grass, he felt as though he had touched a piece of ice. He immediately placed the Blueheart Grass into his backpack, and then looked all around. "I wonder if there is any more Blueheart Grass here!"

A place which was capable of giving birth to one patch of Blueheart Grass was capable of giving birth to a second.

Using the Floating Technique, Linley continued to drift downwards into the roiling white fog. At the same time, Linley kept a close eye out, despite the fog making everything blurry. He could make out countless vines twisting about the cliffs.

"That's huge!"

The farther down into the canyon he went, the more Linley realized how enormous this place truly was. At the top of the canyon, the distance between the two walls was perhaps only a few hundred meters, but by now, Linley was certain that the distance was absolutely at least several thousand meters. He continued to float close to the wall. Using his vision, his flotation speed, and his angle against the wall, he was able to guesstimate this distance.

"Roar..."

"Grrr...."

All sorts of low-pitched growls emanated from below, occasionally sounding out. They came from all over the place. Just judging from the sound alone, there had to be over a hundred magical beasts below. Linley couldn't help but feel his heart quail. "Magical beasts. There are many magical beasts below!" Just from hearing the sound, Linley could tell.

Linley fixed himself against the cliff walls while gripping onto the vines with his hands as he descended more slowly and more carefully.

“Boss, I can sense great danger below.” Bebe suddenly said to Linley through their mental link.

Linley also felt as though his heart was tightening. The further down he went, the clearer the growls of the magical beasts became. Those low growls were powerful. Clearly, they were coming from magical beasts of large size. Generally speaking, large magical beasts were not weak. Powerful magical beasts weren’t necessarily large, but large magical beasts were generally powerful.

“Blueheart Grass!”

Linley suddenly saw that directly below him, far away, was another patch of Blueheart Grass. Surrounding the Blueheart Grass was many green vines and shrubs. As Linley was not a fearful person to begin with, upon seeing the Blueheart Grass, Linley began float down while keeping his hands gripped to the rattan vines.

But at this point in time, Linley totally failed to notice...

Coiled up amidst the green vines surrounding the Blueheart Grass was a giant green python snake, at least twenty meters long and thick enough that it would take two men to put their arms around it. That giant python was very green and also coiled up like a rattan vine. Given that it was also covered slightly by the fog, Linley didn’t notice that it was there at all.

As he descended, Linley drew nearer and nearer to the Blueheart Grass.

“Boss, careful! That’s a monstrous python!” Bebe suddenly, urgently said to Linley through their link.

“Python?” Linley was startled.

Virtually all python-type magical beasts were exceedingly powerful. Even the weakest Trihorn Python was a magical beast of the sixth rank. Linley immediately surveyed his surroundings carefully. By now, Linley was roughly around a hundred meters away from the giant python. After carefully searching for it, he quickly located the giant python.

“Whoah.” Linley sucked in a deep breath.

That thirty-meter long python, as thick as a water barrel, made Linley’s heart quail. “Green Tattooed Python. A magical beast of the seventh rank – the Green Tattooed Python.” The information he knew about this type of Python immediately sprang to mind.

By now, Linley also realized why it was that this canyon had so much white fog.

“The Mist Technique is just a water-style technique of the first rank. A single Green Tattooed Python, a magical beast of the seventh rank, can generate enormous, almost unlimited amounts of white mist in its surroundings. With this canyon having so much mist of such density, there’s definitely more than one Green Tattooed Python here.”

Linley immediately came to this realization.

The canyon had a depth and width of around ten kilometers long. For such a huge canyon to be totally covered in white mist, one could only imagine how many Pythons were here. That Green Tattooed Python which lay hidden amidst the vines suddenly moved. Its enormous head turned to stare at Linley, and its two cold eyes stared death at him.

“Grrrr....”

A terrifying sound rumbled out from the Green Tattooed Python’s maw, and at the same time, it shot forward at high speed.

“Rawr!” “Hiss!” “Grrr!” The entire canyon began to fill up with the calls of various beasts. At the same time, loud, sonorous movement sounds could be heard. Glancing below, Linley saw that over ten enormous creatures were moving towards him. And, Linley could tell that these ten made up just a tiny fraction of the creatures in this gorge.

“Flee!”

Faced with the attack by the Green Tattooed Python, Linley immediately began floating up at maximum speed. Controlling the force of the wind, he was able to make the flotation pressure exceed his body weight, causing him to rocket upwards at an astonishing speed. While flying upwards, Linley could already see a monstrously large Green Tattooed Python crawl up after him along the cliff walls. Its cold, serpentine eyes stared at Linley, promising death while the serpent itself hissed nonstop.

“Screech! Screech!”

A high-pierced bird cry split the air, and from below, dozens of giant birds suddenly charged forward in pursuit of Linley.

“Dragonhawks! Those are Dragonhawks!” Linley’s face immediately turned paper white.

Chapter 22 – The Foggy Gulch (part 2)

Over ten Dragonhawks, each larger than a Griffon, were flying in fast pursuit of Linley. Through the Coiling Dragon ring, Linley immediately expended his mageforce to make himself rise even faster, while at the same time beginning to mumble the words to the Earthguard spell.

“Whoosh!”

Only the roaring wind could be heard. Linley had long since left the Green Tattooed Python behind, but the Dragonhawks flew at an amazing speed, and were drawing closer and closer to Linley. Even after Linley flew out of the canyon, those ten Dragonhawks continued in hot pursuit of Linley, following him outside.

Running at his maximum speed, Linley made his way through the forest as quickly as possible, but no matter how fast his legs were, how could he compare with the speed of the winged Dragonhawks?

“Screeech!” The Dragonhawks issued piercing cries.

The wingspan of the Dragonhawks, at maximum extension, was over twenty meters long. These ten-plus Dragonhawks blotted out the sky as they all flew directly at Linley. Linley felt as though the entire world was growing dark. As the Dragonhawks descended upon Linley, they all opened their beaks and belched forth plumes of flame at him, immediately turning the surrounding trees into blazing pyres.

Fortunately, the Earthguard armor which Linley summoned continued to protect him, covering his entire body.

“Crackle, crackle.” The fires roared and blazed against the Earthguard armor. Earth-colored elemental essence swirled all about Linley.

Amongst the dragon-type creatures, Dragonhawks and Landwyrms were the weakest of their kin, but even they, the weakest of dragon-type creatures, were magical beasts of the sixth rank. What’s more, Landwyrms and Dragonhawks were pack-type beasts. Faced with an aerial assault from over ten magical beasts of the sixth rank, even a warrior of the seventh rank would flee.

The Dragonhawks charged forward, descending upon Linley....

“Smash!” A Dragonhawk’s sharp talons smote Linley’s Earthguard armor a mighty blow. The Earthguard armor shuddered visibly, and specks of golden light began to gently flicker on top of it.

"I can't take those hits head on!"

That clawed attack terrified Linley. At the highest speed he could muster, he scurried deeper into the forest, charging into the densest, hardest-to-traverse area. Jumping, leaping, crawling...Linley went all out in his attempt to flee. But those Dragonhawk's continued to strike viciously at Linley's head with their vicious claws.

"Hissss!"

Bebe let out a fierce screech of his own, and then he rose on his hind legs, suddenly transforming in size from twenty centimeters to half a meter tall. But compared to the Dragonhawks, with their 20-meter long wingspans, Bebe was still just a small speck.

"Swish!" Bebe leapt off of Linley's shoulders, transforming into a black blur as he shot directly towards the closest attacking Dragonhawk.

The terrifying sound of bones splintering could suddenly be heard, along with the agonized cries of the Dragonhawk. That Dragonhawk directly fell from the sky, but before it did, Bebe used it as a launchpad to leap at the next closest Dragonhawk. With two vicious bites, he directly bit this one to death as well.

Dragonhawks were just beasts of the sixth rank, while Bebe was able to force a magical beast of the seventh rank, a Velocidragon, to flee in defeat.

What's more...

There was a huge gap in difficulty to advance as well as in power from the sixth rank to the seventh rank. Bebe wasn't capable of flight, but once he got into physical contact with a Dragonhawk, it was as good as dead. In a few short moments, three of the ten-plus Dragonhawks were dead.

The other Dragonhawks all flew higher in terror. Seeing them fly higher, there was nothing that Bebe could do either, as he himself could not fly.

Those Dragonhawks hovered around Linley for a while, before finally letting out a few mournful cries as they began flying back towards the canyon.

"What a terrifying gorge." Only now did Linley finally let out a sigh.

While collecting the magicite cores of the three dead Dragonhawks, Linley pondered the question of the Foggy Gorge.

“Grandpa Doehring.” Linley suddenly called out, and Doehring Cowart flew out of the Coiling Dragon ring. Still appearing to wear a pristine, moon-white robe, Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke to Linley. “Linley, is there something you need?”

Linley had not yet calmed down.

“Grandpa Doehring, just now, I entered a foggy gorge. I didn’t expect the place to be brimming with magical beasts. There was a Green Tattooed Python there, and huge crawling creatures. I didn’t get a good look at them, but in terms of size, they definitely were not any smaller than a Velocidragon. There were Dragonhawks there as well...and I could tell that this was in just a small portion of the gorge. I have no idea how large the entirety of the Foggy Gorge was.”

Thinking back, Linley felt a surge of fear again. He had actually stumbled into such a gathering spot for magical beasts in that gorge.

“Oh?”

Doehring Cowart seemed rather surprised. “This Foggy Gorge had so many magical beasts? Interesting. Generally speaking, only magical beasts of the same type will gather together, but the magical beasts you just mentioned were all of different types. They actually all gathered together in this Foggy Gorge? Interesting. How interesting. If I were still alive, I would most likely go inside and take a look myself.”

Linley shook his head helplessly and laughed, “That gorge even contained Blueheart Grass. There was one patch that I didn’t have time to gather. I was only able to gather one.”

“Blueheart Grass?” Doehring Cowart’s eyes lit up. “Any place where Blueheart Grass can grow definitely is no ordinary place. There definitely must be some sort of precious treasure within that Foggy Gorge, or perhaps some extremely powerful magical beast, such as a magical beast of the ninth rank, or even a Saint-level magical beast. However...”

Doehring Cowart began to frown. “Generally speaking, powerful magical beasts are very territorial. If there was a powerful magical beast there, they probably wouldn’t permit creatures like Dragonhawks and Green Tattooed Pythons to live there as well.”

“But Dragonhawks, Green Tattooed Pythons, and those huge crawling beasts you mentioned are all able to live there together? Bizarre. How bizarre.” Doehring Cowart couldn’t understand either. This Foggy Gorge seemed to be full of contradictions.

Linley laughed. "Grandpa Doehring, don't overthink it. When I become a magus of the seventh rank, I'll be able to use the 'Soaring Technique'. At that time, we'll come for another investigation."

Upon becoming a magus of the seventh rank, his Earthguard would have reached the level of generating jadestone armor. The additional speed granted by the Supersonic spell would also dramatically improve. By then, Linley would have full confidence in his ability to deal with the Dragonhawks. And with the ability to use the Soaring Technique to fly, Linley would be able to easily enter and leave the gorge.

"Magus of the seventh rank? You are only a magus of the fifth rank right now. You have a long way to go." Doehring Cowart said, pouring cold water over Linley's enthusiasm.

In his heart, Linley knew this as well.

Perhaps becoming a magus of the sixth rank wouldn't be too hard, but there was a huge gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank.

"All roads are traversed one step at a time." Linley smiled. "It's been about two months since I entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. It is about time for me to go back. It'll take several days to get back anyhow. I'll use that time to do some more training."

With Bebe on his shoulders, Linley embarked on his return trip back home.

Chapter 23 - Her Name Was Alice (part 1)

On the return journey, the magical beasts which Linley encountered grew progressively weaker. By the time Linley stepped into the outer regions, all of the monsters he encountered were of the third and fourth ranks. They posed no threat to him at all. But despite this, Linley didn't dare to relax his vigilance.

Doehring Cowart travelled alongside Linley, but in his mind, Doehring Cowart was worrying. Right now, Linley carried within him a steady, stable presence, but when he made his move, he showed no mercy at all. His eyes also carried within them a cold, forbidding aura.

Doehring Cowart still remembered how, when he first entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, Linley's eyes were filled with sincerity. He was a very trusting person.

After hesitating for a while, Doehring Cowart mentally spoke to Linley. "Linley."

Making his way through the mountains, Linley turned his head to look questioningly at Doehring Cowart. "Grandpa Doehring, what is it?"

Doehring Cowart nodded as he spoke seriously. "Linley, before entering the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, I had warned you that people were not to be easily trusted, as people's intentions are not easily understood. I told you to be wary of others, to have a cautious mind."

Linley nodded. "Grandpa Doehring, your words were very correct. One really cannot easily trust others. If I had listened to Grandpa Doehring's words early on, my chest most likely wouldn't have this knife scar."

Doehring Cowart shook his head. "Although one cannot easily trust others, one also cannot be over-cautious. The way you are currently, how will you be able to interact with people in the future? Remember, you can't be too cold and callous towards others, even if you can't be overly trusting either. Trust is something which is built up through a long period of time. Do not easily trust the words of others."

Linley was very smart. Both at home and at the Ernst Institute, he had read many books. Upon hearing Doehring Cowart's words, he somewhat understood. But the merciless life he had experienced over these past two months, the human cruelty he had witnessed and experienced, was something he had seen so clearly. For him to trust people again would be very hard.

"Doehring Cowart, I understand." Linley nodded.

Doehring Cowart secretly sighed, but at the same time, he was also happy. "It's a good thing that Linley has this little Shadowmouse, Bebe, for a companion, as well as those friends of his at the Ernst Institute. At least he shouldn't become excessively unfeeling."

Doehring Cowart could still remember how, thousands of years ago, when the Pouant Empire was still around, another Saint-level combatant of the Pouant Empire who also dressed in white. That white-robed man was a famous Sword Saint, and he was also an extremely proud, reclusive person.

"Grandpa Doehring, when father sees all of these magicite cores, what do you think his reaction will be?" Linley suddenly looked at Doehring Cowart, smiling as he asked the question. At this moment, Linley's eyes were filled with eagerness for his father's praise.

He looked just like a kid who had just performed stellarly on a test and was awaiting his father's praise.

"Linley, are you planning to give all of this money to your father?" Doehring Cowart asked with a smile.

Linley nodded. "Of course. These magicite cores are worth around 70,000 gold coins. All I need is enough to feed myself. A few dozen coins each year is enough. But father needs to manage all of our clan's affairs, and also provide for Wharton's tuition. Of course I'll give these magicite cores to father."

Linley didn't want to personally sell these magicite cores. After all, in terms of buying and selling, he had no experience at all. He probably wouldn't even know if he got cheated.

"Haha, I trust your father will be so excited that he'll be jumping up and down," Doehring Cowart said, laughing loudly.

Linley couldn't help but grin as well. He immediately sped up the pace on his journey back.

By now, Linley couldn't even be bothered to kill magical beasts of the third and fourth ranks. He quickly made his way through the mountains. When he arrived next to a small creek, he paused as he heard the furious bellows of a magical beast, intermixed with the shouts of humans engaged in battle with it.

"Hrm? If they dare come to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, they must be at least combatants of the fifth rank. But in the surrounding areas, the local beasts are of the third or fourth ranks at most. How could the battle sound so prolonged and frenetic?" Linley was rather curious.

Within the inner areas of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, where beasts of the fifth, sixth, and sometimes even the seventh rank would appear, there would often be many frantic battles. But in the outer areas, this was quite rare. Battles would generally end extremely quickly.

With a jump, Linley leapt 7-8 meters up. Landing on a tree, he began tree-walking his way towards the scene of the battle.

Upon arriving, Linley surveyed the battle from his position on the tree.

He saw that there were two young men and two young women engaged in a bloody battle with a Bloodthirsty Warpig. One of the youths, wearing a white armor, was shouting out loudly while directing the course of battle. "Second bro, don't run

around so wildly! Protect Alice [Ai'li'si]! I'll draw this stupid pig's attention away. Niya [Ni'ya], don't panic, aim your arrows at its vitals!"

These four people clearly were very inexperienced. Upon encountering danger, they had panicked. Only the leader wearing the white armor seemed a bit more capable."

"These four really have some guts. That youngster in white armor should be a warrior of the fifth rank, while the other three are just combatants of the fourth rank at best." Linley shook his head. Those other three really were daring, to come here without even having reached the fifth rank.

A red-haired youngster began to shout frantically, "Big brother Kalan [Ka'lan], didn't you say that the outer regions only had magical beasts of the third or fourth ranks? This is a magical beast of the fifth rank!"

The leader of the group of four, the fifth ranked warrior Kalan, also felt helpless. As a warrior of the fifth rank, it shouldn't have been a dangerous affair for him to bring a number of friends to the outer regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. But he didn't expect to run into a magical beast of the fifth rank.

"Whoosh!" More than ten earthen spears suddenly erupted from the ground beneath the Warpig, and three of them even pierced into the Warpig's body, but they were all broken and shattered by the Warpig's tough hide.

"Roar!"

The Bloodthirsty Warpig immediately turned its enraged attention upon the only magus in the group, before charging forward at the magus rapidly. The Warpig's charge was truly too fearsome, and what's more, flicks of flame could be seen coming from its nostrils. Immediately, it caused the remaining youngster to panic.

"Run! Alice, quick, dodge!" Kalan shouted loudly.

The girl named Alice had a head full of long, golden hair and a pair of hazy eyes. Seeing the danger, Alice too tried to flee in panic, but the Bloodthirsty Warpig was a magical beast of the fifth rank, after all. Although it was not very intelligent, it was much smarter than a normal animal.

The Bloodthirsty Warpig chased after Alice.

Seeing the Warpig charge after her, Alice was going to flee, but as she did, she slipped and tripped on a vine and fell face-forward into the ground. Turning her head, she saw the furious eyes of the Warpig draw closer and closer to her. Based on

Alice's weak physical conditioning, the Bloodthirsty Warpig probably was capable of killing her with just one stomp.

Alice was struck dumb with terror.

The other two boys and the girl were also stupefied, not knowing what to do. There was no way they could rescue her in time.

"Alice!" The youngster called Kalan shouted loudly with anguish. Although he was a warrior of the fifth rank, he simply didn't have enough experience."

"Rumble!"

Seven or eight sharp earthen spears suddenly jutted out of the ground. Although the Bloodthirsty Warpig, a magical beast of the fifth rank, did have thick skin, two of the spears still managed to penetrate its thick skin and into its flesh, causing fresh blood to flow from the wound.

But alas...

The earthen spears only pierced its flesh. They didn't actually cause any injury to its vitals or organs.

"Grrrrrrrrr!" The Bloodthirsty Warpig lifted its head up and bellowed in pain.

"Swish!" A black dagger suddenly fell down from above, piercing into the Warpig's eye like a bolt of lightning. The Warpig's eyeball exploded, and the black dagger penetrated directly into the Warpig's brain. Agonized, the Warpig's entire body shuddered as it collapsed. Shortly afterwards, it no longer moved.

Kalan, Niya, and Alice were all so terrified, their hearts almost leapt out of their bodies.

They watched as a powerfully built young warrior dressed in blue used the knife to extract the magicite core of the Warpig in a very practiced manner, and then turn to leave. But Kalan was the first amongst the four to recover, and he immediately shouted out, "Friend, please stay!"

Chapter 24- Her Name Was Alice (part 2)

"Hrm?" Linley turned around, frowning.

Kalan immediately walked over to thank Linley. "My name is Kalan. I very much would like to thank you for your support. If it wasn't for you, Alice most likely would've died just then."

That girl named Alice ran over as well. Clearly, she was still panicked, and she was panting so heavily her chest rose and fell with each breath. But her soft, hazy eyes were fixed on Linley. "Thank you for saving my life. I'm Alice. My full name is Alice Straf [Si'da'fu]. I'm also a magus of the earth-style."

Linley's gaze paused for a moment on Alice.

He had to admit, Alice was a very refined-looking young lady. She had an aura which would naturally make men want to cherish and protect her. She was the sort of girl who didn't need to use her voice or cosmetics to improve herself.

"Linley, when you see people in danger in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, you usually don't assist, right? What's going on today?" Doehring Cowart's jesting voice rang out in Linley's head. "Oh, I get it, you must have taken a fancy to that Alice girl."

Linley frowned.

"Grandpa Doehring, in the past, it wasn't that I didn't want to help them. It was that within the inner regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the monsters which people were dealing with were at least magical beasts of the sixth rank, sometimes even the seventh rank. I didn't have the ability to help them. Killing a beast of the fifth rank isn't too hard, which is why I went ahead and helped." Linley immediately explained to Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart chuckled and no longer spoke.

"My name is Tony [Tuo'ni]. Milord magus, what is your name?" The other male youth also spoke.

Linley calmly glanced at this group of people. "How long have you been in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

"This is the first day," Kalan admitted helplessly. "I didn't expect that on our very first day, we would encounter a magical beast of the fifth rank. We really were too unlucky. Based on what the books said, the outer region should only have magical beasts of the third and fourth ranks. The four of us shouldn't have been in any danger."

"Foolish." Linley shook his head and spoke.

That female archer named Niya immediately got angry. "Hey, why are you being so cocky? You saved Alice, but that doesn't give you the right to insult people!"

"Niya!" Kalan immediately shouted.

Linley directly explained, "I really very much admire your courage, that all of you dare to barge into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts like this. But at the same time, I have to say that you are very lucky. You didn't run into any bandits on your way to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts."

"Bandits?" Kalan and the others looked at each other. They really hadn't encountered any bandits.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was over ten thousand kilometers long, after all. There were many routes by which one could enter. To not encounter any bandits was very normal.

"Let me tell you this. If you don't want to die, then immediately depart these mountains." Linley directly said.

"Why? Are there a lot of magical beasts of the fifth rank in the outer regions as well?" The younger named Tony said curiously.

Linley calmly explained, "In these mountains, especially in the outer areas, the most danger comes not from magical beasts, but from other humans. The four of you are both weak and inexperienced. I trust that certain greedy people will not let you slip away. I expect that the only reason why you haven't been discovered yet is because today is your first day in these mountains. Otherwise, the four of you would be killed by now."

"The most danger comes from other humans?" Kalan frowned, but shortly afterwards, his face changed.

Kalan respectfully said to Linley, "Milord magus, we just entered these mountains and only know a little bit about this area. We made a private decision to come here. I hope you can assist us, milord magus, and escort us out of these mountains."

Linley couldn't help but frown.

He hated trouble. But if these people were to encounter bandits on their way home, they really would be in for it.

"Milord magus, we beseech your aid." Alice also begged.

Linley glanced at Alice. Seeing the look of appeal in her eyes, and imagining her being killed by bandits, Linley's heart softened. Nodding, he said, "Fine. I'm headed back anyways. I'll take you along with me. But if we really do encounter bandits on the way back, I can only promise to try my best. If you end up getting killed, there's nothing I can do."

Kalan immediately joyfully nodded. "For you to be willing to aid us, milord magus, we are extremely grateful already."

Linley nodded, then immediately headed forwards. His back towards the four of them, he said, "Follow me." Kalan and the other four began following Linley. Under Linley's protection, they departed the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts and headed in the direction of the city.

.....

On the road back, Kalan and the others learned Linley's name. That Alice, also an earth-style magus, was filled with admiration for Linley. She, too, was only fifteen years old, and she was considered the number one genius at the Wellen [Wei'lin] Institute.

But despite this, Alice was only a magus of the fourth rank. This sort of accomplishment, at the Ernst Institute, would only be considered average.

A break in the journey. Linley, Kalan, Alice, and the others were all eating. Linley and Alice were seated together.

"Big brother Linley, you really are too amazing. You became a magus of the fifth rank when you were fourteen. I probably will be twenty when I reach the fifth rank." Alice stared worshipfully at Linley.

"I'm nothing. The number one genius at our institute, Dixie, became a magus of the fourth rank when he was nine, and a magus of the fifth rank when he turned twelve." Linley said casually. He didn't disclose...that when he was thirteen, he had also been a magus of the fourth rank. But by age fourteen, he had become a magus of the fifth rank."

In just one short year, he had advanced as much as Dixie had in three.

"A magus of the fourth rank at age nine? I'm fifteen, but I just became a magus of the fourth rank. And I'm considered the top genius at my school. Our Wellen Institute really can't compare at all to your Ernst Institute." Alice sighed.

"Big brother Linley, it felt like to me that your Earthen Spear Array was very powerful and formidable, even more so than the other magi of the fifth rank at my school. Why is that?" Alice was also an earth-style magus. Naturally, she noticed the differences in Linley's spell.

Linley smiled faintly. It wasn't just power. The speed at which it erupted was also very fast.

"Earth-style magic's origin lies in the essence of the world..." Linley began explaining to Alice. To be honest, in terms of understanding earth magic, Linley had a much deeper grasp and understanding than even the earth-style instructors of the Ernst Institute. After all, he had a Saint-level Grand Magus as his personal tutor.

Alice stared at Linley, totally focusing and concentrating on him.

One listened while the other spoke. As they talked, the two of them drew closer and closer to each other. Totally absorbed in magical theory, Linley only noticed after taking a break that their faces were now so close that only a fist's worth of distance separated them.

Linley was startled. This was his first time being so close to a girl. Being so close, he could clearly see Alice's two hazy, soft eyes, her pert nose...Linley even thought that he could feel her breath on him and smell the fragrance of her body.

"Big brother Linley, why'd you stop talking?" Alice asked curiously. But moments later, Alice realized what happened. She immediately pulled back, and her face immediately flushed as red as an apple.

Linley forced himself to calm down, and then stood up to face the others. Pretending that nothing was amiss, he said, "Alright, everybody eat up. We're going to continue to travel soon. Let's do our best to arrive at the city early."

Chapter 25 - Violet in the Night Wind (part 1)

On the Greenleaf Road of Fenlai City, the capital of the Kingdom of Fenlai, a member of the Holy Union, there were many noble manors clustered together. In front of one particular manor, over ten people were clustered together.

"The Debs [De'bu'si] clan would like to thank you, Linley, for your assistance. If it wasn't for you, this child of ours, Kalan, probably would've suffered greatly." A distinguished looking old man with flowing silver hair smiled towards Linley. By

this old man's side was Kalan, Alice, Tony, and Niya. Behind them were the servants of the Debs clan."

Turning around, the old man nodded at one of the servants, who took out a small golden sack from within his clothes.

Taking the gold sack, the old man turned to Linley with a smile. "This is a hundred gold coins. Although it isn't much, it represents the gratitude of our Debs clan. I hope, Linley, you will accept it."

"No need. It didn't take any effort on my part." Linley said quite courteously. "I should be heading off now."

The old man didn't persist. Smiling, he watched Linley depart.

"Tony, you three should go home as well. Your parents are no doubt extremely worried." Smiling, the old man spoke. After bidding farewell, Alice, Niya, and Tony all headed back to their own homes.

When Kalan and the silver-haired old man returned to their own living room, the old man's face suddenly turned cold. In a voice filled with frozen rage, he barked out, "On your knees!"

With a thud, Kalan immediately fell to his knees. "Second Grandpa, it was wrong of me. This time, I brazenly took three of my friends to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts without clearly investigating all of its associated dangers. Second Grandpa, please punish me."

"Hmph! Brazen?"

The old man's cold glare stared daggers at Kalan. "Kalan, you are already an adult. In addition, you are the heir and successor to our Debs clan. How can you make such a foolish, such an utterly moronic mistake? How could you possibly imagine how dangerous the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is? You dared to traverse it without so much as even informing the clan? Hmph! I'll let your own father decide what punishment would be suitable. Just let me remind you of one thing – in the future, if you continue to act so foolishly, even if the clan is handed over to you, you will wreck it!"

Hanging his head, Kalan didn't dare to speak.

The Debs clan could be considered one of the three top clans in the Kingdom of Fenlai. The reason the Debs clan was so powerful was not because it had a high rank of nobility; it was because the Debs clan was the direct trading partner in Fenlai of

the Dawson Conglomerate, one of the three greatest trading unions in the Yulan continent.

The wealth of the Dawson Conglomerate could match an entire kingdom's wealth. It's business stretched across the entire continent.

Any of the three trading unions on the Yulan continent possessed a terrifying amount of both wealth and power. Here in the Kingdom of Fenlai, many clans wanted to do business with them, because being able to do business with the Dawson Conglomerate meant being able to ride atop a titanic war-machine.

For the Debs clan to be able to do business with the Dawson Conglomerate was an extremely impressive thing.

After all, even the two major alliances and the Four Great Empires had to do their best to watch their step around the trading unions and to do their best to make them happy.

.....

After departing Fenlai City, Linley took the road towards the Ernst Institute. Bebe was perched on Linley's shoulders, keeping watch, while Doehring Cowart was also walking side by side with Linley.

"Grandpa Doehring, have you ever felt that this world is a terrifying place?" Linley said mentally.

Doehring Cowart nodded, but he didn't speak. He just quietly listened.

"In the past, when I visited Fenlai City, I didn't notice anything. But upon returning from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, I've learned so much. The ruthlessness and mercilessness of the mountains is naked and open. It's bloody, without any concealment."

"If we look at the high ranking magi and warriors, as well as the nobles, of Fenlai City, on the surface, they all seem to be polite and courteous. They make the entire Fenlai City seem so splendid. But the class system in Fenlai City is so severe, so callous."

"Even the law itself gives nobles far more privileges than the commoners. Although Fenlai City is very prosperous and gaudy, filled with laughter, its unspoken rules are far more binding than those of the mountains. In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, there are no such things as nobles or commoners, only the strong and the weak."

Linley was slowly beginning to understand the world.

In this world, the nobles had all the advantages, while the commoners were trampled upon. No matter how gentlemanly and refined the nobles acted, or how benevolent they behaved, there was no way they could alter the severe inequality that existed in the world as a whole. If you wanted to have status as a commoner, your only choice was to become a powerful warrior or a powerful magus.

If you didn't strive hard, you would be discarded.

"Human society is far more complicated than the world of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. They just hide the same brutality which exists in the mountains under a beautiful set of clothes. But sometimes, this set of beautiful clothes can be very useful." From the bottom of his heart, Linley felt contempt for those nobles who pretended to be kind but really were not.

After seeing the cruelty of the mountains, as well as the splendor of Fenlai City, Linley's mentality had begun to change upon seeing the great contrast.

"Are you afraid of struggling?" Doehring Cowart suddenly asked.

Linley smirked. "Afraid? No. I enjoy it. If there were no struggles in the world, and everything was calm and peaceful, how boring would that be? I like struggle, especially struggle that is exciting. Dancing on the edge of a knife...that's the sort of life which is the most exhilarating."

"Squeak squeak!" Bebe let out two cries as well.

....

They stepped into the Ernst Institute.

After having travelled into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts and after having witnessed the cruelty of mankind, Linley cherished the genuine friendships he had formed at the Institute even more than before. Upon entering his dorm, he heard these words....

"Boss Yale, Linley still isn't back yet. Could he have run into a dangerous situation in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

"Shut your stinking mouth, fourth bro. Third bro will definitely come back to us safely. Come on, let's go eat..." As he raised his head, Yale saw that familiar shadow standing in the doorway. He paused, stunned. George and Reynolds were stunned

as well. But then, immediately afterwards, the three of them charged forward towards Linley.

“Haha, third bro, you finally came back!” Yale was the first to reach Linley, wrapping his arms around Linley in a bear hug.

Reynolds also shouted out happily, “Wow, Linley, do you know that Boss Yale and George have been muttering about you every day? They were all worried about you. I was the only one who was totally sure you’d make it back safe.”

“Fourth bro.” George stared at him. “Just now, you were talking about being worried that Linley had encountered something dangerous.”

“Me?” A look of ‘confusion’ was on Reynolds’ face. “Did I say such a thing?”

Seeing his three bros together, Linley’s heart instantly felt warm. Yale immediately waved his arm ostentatiously and said, “Alright, enough chitchat. Third bro’s safe return from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is a major event! Let’s go have a good celebration!”

“Second bro, fourth bro.” Linley laughed as well. “Let’s go. We have to all go and have some drinks. My treat!”

“Whoah.” Reynolds stared at him. “Your treat?”

Yale laughed loudly. “Right, third bro has to treat us. Don’t forget that a while back, those representatives from the Proulx Gallery contacted us and send us that letter of invitation. Those three sculptures of third bro managed to sell for over 4000 gold coins. We have to have a good celebration.”

“A letter of invitation from the Proulx Gallery?” Linley was startled.

Yale hurriedly explained, “Third bro, your sculptures sold for high prices. The Proulx Gallery has already totally recognized your abilities as an expert sculptor, which is why they are now inviting you to start up a private booth at their ‘Hall of the Experts’. Right, let me give the letter to you.” Yale immediately ran towards the interior of the dormitory.

Reynolds said in a very secretive way towards Linley, “Linley, you wanna know something? Ever since that guy from the Proulx Gallery came to our school, the news that you’ve been invited to have a private booth at the gallery has spread across the entire institute. You fame has tremendously increased.”

"It's been spread across the entire institute?" Linley was somewhat numb with surprise. He himself had just found out, after all.

"Right. In the entire institute, you might be the last one to know about this, actually." George chortled as well.

"Linley, this is the letter of invitation the Proulx Gallery sent us." Yale ca

Chapter 26 - Violet in the Night Wind (part 2)

Night time. The four bros of dorm 1987 were walking along a dark, silent street of the Ernst Institute, casually talking about what had happened over these past two months.

"As vicious as that?" Reynolds, amazed, tugged aside Linley's shirt. Seeing all the crisscrossing scars across Linley's chest, he couldn't help but hold his breath. The nearby George also went silent. Only Yale was able to laugh, "Haha, you guys have no experience. When I was a kid, I saw way worse than this."

"Boss Yale, are you serious?" Reynolds said in astonishment.

Yale smiled cockily. "Of course I'm serious. And I've seen more than a few as well. For example, killing prisoners by torture. Or real people fighting against magical beasts with their bare hands. When they fought barehanded against the beasts, they were surrounded by a ring of rich spectators. The sight was really bloody."

Hearing Yale's words, Linley was able to picture the scene in his mind.

"It's good to be on campus," George sighed.

Linley also nodded in agreement. By this time of the night, many couples could be seen walking together on the road, some holding hands, others seated together on the backs of a magical beast. Campus life was very leisurely.

"Right. Boss Yale, aren't you going to go spend tonight with your girlfriend? Why aren't you getting ready to leave?" Reynolds suddenly said.

Yale said with dissatisfaction, "Girlfriend? My bro has just come back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts after encountering so many near-death situations. And I'm going to go spend time with my girlfriend? Reynolds, you have to remember these words: Bro's are like your arms and legs, while girls are like your clothes. They're just good for playing with."

A look of contempt immediately appeared on Reynolds' face.

"Linley!" A surprised voice suddenly rang out from far away.

Linley and the others all turned their heads and watched as a tall, slender, beautiful young woman with golden hair ran towards them happily. Upon reaching Linley, she exclaimed in surprise, "Linley, you're back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts? This is wonderful. You disappeared for two full months this time. I was so worried. Are you injured?"

"Delia, I'm fine," Linley laughed as he responded.

Delia was also someone whom Linley had met just as he had enrolled in school. They were on very close terms with each other. When he was together with Delia, Linley felt as though he could totally relax, and be without any mental pressure. It was just like when he was with his three dear bros.

"Delia, Uncle's carriage is outside waiting for us. Let's not waste any time." A cold voice rang out.

Turning his head, Linley saw a youth dressed in long robes standing some distance away. It was Delia's elder brother, Dixie, one of the two geniuses of the Ernst Institute. Dixie's robe was extremely clean and neat, without a single blemish or stain. His eyes also seemed very clear and tranquil.

"Oh." Letting out a disappointed sound, Delia looked at Linley. "Linley, father asked me and my brother to go back. Our carriage is outside waiting for us. I have to go back now."

"Alright, Delia. We can chat when you come back." Linley smiled as he replied.

"Right. Bye." Delia clearly felt rather disappointed at not having more time to chat with Linley. Dixie walked over to them as well. He only glanced at Delia, and Delia immediately began walking towards him. But then, Dixie turned to look at Linley. "Linley, I heard you successfully returned from your training exercise in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Congratulations."

Linley was stunned.

This Dixie was actually speaking to him?

Dixie's coldness and aloofness was legendary at the Ernst Institute. Most people would feel themselves to be under enormous pressure next to Dixie, especially when

his cold, clear eyes fell upon them. That sort of psychological pressure was enough to cause some to break under the strain.

“Oh. Thanks.” Linley replied.

Dixie barely nodded, and then escorted his sister Delia to the school gates.

....

Austoni carefully looked at Linley, sighing in amazement, “Linley, I must say, you really are a genius, a super genius! A fifteen year old youngster who is a genius amongst the geniuses at the number one magus academy in the entire Yulan continent, and also someone who has reached an incredibly high level in the art of stonesculpting.”

“For you to be able to accomplish all this is a miracle.”

“Putting aside the fact that you are a genius magus, even in the world of artists, in this day and age, most sculptors who qualify to be invited by us to open up a private booth in the Hall of Experts are at least forty years old. You are the youngest one. Even in our entire history, there are only two unparalleled geniuses who are a match for you. But the difference is...not only are you a genius sculptor, you are also a genius magus. Wow...what a genius.”

Austoni’s words of praise caused Linley to be embarrassed and not know what to say.

“Austoni, stop wasting time. Hurry up and finish. We four bros are going to go out and have some fun.” Yale urged.

Only now did Austoni seem to come to himself. He hurriedly pulled over a stack of documents and withdrew a silver magicrystal card. Smiling, he presented it to Linley. “Linley, this silver magicrystal card was specially designed by the Golden Bank of the Four Empires. It represents that you are one of our expert sculptors. In the future, any and all proceeds from sales of your art will be directly transferred by us into the balance for this card.”

“Right now, this silver magicrystal card doesn’t have an owner imprinted. Use your fingerprint to seal it to you. In the future, you can use it.” Austoni respectfully handed the magicrystal card to Linley, then said in an eager voice, “Linley, might I ask if you brought any sculptures for us this time?”

Linley nodded his head slightly. “I have. Three in total.”

Austoni's smile immediately became even more radiant.

....

Night time. Within the Jade Water Paradise. Linley, George, and two courtesans were there by themselves, drinking while talking and laughing. By now, Reynolds and Yale had long since retired to their rooms with their courtesans.

"Jeeze, those two, Boss Yale and fourth bro..." Linley drank a cup of wine as he spoke to George, who was in the middle of laughing and chatting with his girl. "Second bro, my head is getting a bit dizzy. I'm going to go out to cool off a bit."

"Sure." George replied, then continued to chat with his companion.

Heading downstairs, Linley directly left the Jade Water Paradise. Upon departing the lively premises, Linley suddenly felt a cold, refreshing night wind blow past him, helping to clear his mind. Compared to the Jade Water Paradise, the outside was much calmer and more tranquil. Linley began to take a casual walk around the streets of Fenlai City.

The cool night breeze was very refreshing.

There were some noble estates lining the streets, but compared to the Greenleaf Road, the estates on this street, Dry Street, were clearly on a lower level. And on the balcony of one two-story estate in particular, Alice was standing, enjoying the night breeze.

Staring up at the bright moon in the empty sky, Alice couldn't help but think about Linley, who had saved her life.

At that moment, when she had fallen into despair, he had descended from the heavens and vanquished that Bloodthirsty Warpig and saved her life. That action had shaken her deeply. It could be said that that event had left a deep impression on her soul.

"Big brother Linley is a bit taciturn, but when he gets into discussing magic, he's rather handsome." A faint smile appeared on Alice's face as she reminisced.

Suddenly, Alice saw a figure walking on the streets below. His frame seemed very familiar. Taking a closer look, she immediately recognized him, and a smile lit her face up. She hurriedly waved while shouting, "Big brother Linley, big brother Linley!"

Linley, who was walking on the street while enjoying the cool night, looked up suspiciously as he heard someone calling his name.

A distant balcony, a shadowy form dressed in violet, the bright moon illuminating from behind. The violet clothes fluttered in the night breeze, and under the glow of the moon, seemed to radiate. Long hair fluttering alongside the violet clothes. Suddenly, Linley seemed to smell Alice's fragrance.

That fragrance, was so mesmerizing...

"Alice..." Linley couldn't help but walk towards that balcony.

[End of Book 3]